Peach Kolache

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Peach Kolache

by iridiumcarp

Summary

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>
> ..but going to the Slovaceks didn't seem like the worst punishment ever. He was ambivalent to the idea; he would do the same things he was hoping to do all summer – eat as much as he could, laze around like an old family dog, and swim until his muscles spasmed – just without close friends and the freedom of the big city.

When Isaiah's mom finds his pamphlets for the Marine Corps, she decides to send him to her old friend's orchard for the summer. He deems it retribution, but what, or who, he finds at the orchard is anything but.

Notes

i planned and wrote this in a fit of insanity, and i can only pray it continues on into the next chapters. i've had so much fun, and some trouble too, fleshing out nash and slovacek's characters and relationship, and i hope i do them justice.

if i have gotten anything wrong about czech, or slavic, culture, please forgive me and educate me! i've visited the czech republic (and some other slavic countries), though i only stayed in prague for the few days i was there. the culture, art, and food is absolutely beautiful and i implore others to visit. so, definitely tell me if something i've said is wrong (i am not czech, nor american. i write on the fuel of google searches and extensive research), i only seek to further educate myself!

i also don't speak czech, except for the few basic phrases, and i don't personally know anyone who speaks it, either, so phrases or sentences i use may be wrong. please tell me if they are, thank you!

ps. this fic is set in 1992, just before czechoslovakia separated.

i hope you enjoy reading!

Chapter 1: Keystone Bones

When Isaiah was younger, his mom would take him every so often up to her friend's orchard.

The Slovaceks owned a quaint little plot of land in the south-eastern end of Pennsylvania, just between Reading and Lancaster, and an hour's drive from Baltimore. They grew fruit bearing trees, originally apples before a company set up shop and started mass producing them, then oranges, until all their trees died one spring.

Lillian Slovacek, whom they called *Lily*, was the lady of the house. She'd told Isaiah once, when she was bringing out dessert to the dinner table, that her mother made a delicious peach pie, and, since her death, Lily always wanted to grow peaches. So be it.

They had fifteen acres, give or take, but only used two and a half for the house and the barn, and another acre or two for the peach trees. The remaining twelve and a half were wild; fields of waving prairie grasses, a cluster of eastern hemlocks, and a thin branch of the Conestoga that ran right through their land, carving it into two halves. The house was a beauty; a two story Cape Cod built in the 1800s with a wrap-around porch and a modern driveway that Isaiah spent hours chalk-drawing on. It was spacious enough for housing guests, cramped enough to be cozy.

It was Isaiah's home away from home.

His mom started leaving him with the Slovaceks every summer since he was eleven, during the intermediate times between his extracurriculars — usually volunteering in the city or cross country training — and the start of school, when it was too hot to do anything else. He didn't mind it, and didn't take offense to his mom dumping him on another family, as the Slovaceks didn't have kids of their own and did some hand waving gestures whenever Isaiah indicated he felt bad for barging in on their settled lives.

"You seem more of a loss when you're not around, Isaiah," Lily's husband, Alex, had told him one day when they were on the couch, watching an old 70s show Lily loved.

They also didn't mind making him work his keep — keep usually being extra sweet peach kolaches when he already had his share, and free books from Alex's study. They had around 150 semi-dwarf

Redhaven trees that needed weekly maintenance from pruning to watering. Isaiah hated pruning and picking the rotten fruit, but he loved watering the trees, especially when the glaring sun was high in the sky and beating down on his sweating skin. The backwards spray of the broken hose nozzle would soak him top to bottom, allowing him some relief in the hotter days — he also liked watching the shimmering rainbow the water would reflect when the sunlight hit the mist just right, his only entertainment besides Alex's home stereo system he could hear playing constant Slavic hits whenever he got closer to the pale blue barn. The work kept him fit when he wasn't keeping up with his cross country training, somehow always boosting him an extra inch or shaving a couple pounds lighter over the summer.

Then, in his off time, he shouldered through Lily's fifteenth or sixteenth rewatch of her favorite show, read his school-assigned books that he never bothered to get to sooner, or headed down to the river and let time pass by him in the paddles of the river waves, the waving of the towering oak leaves, and the chirps of tired warblers that migrated from Quebec. It was his own little paradise within a peaceful heaven — there were no worries, besides what they were having for dinner, whether they would can or jam the season's offspring, and whatever the loud neighbors were up to. It allowed Isaiah domesticity, calmness in the rage of elementary and high school; his late prepubescent years.

And young adulthood wasn't any better. Relationships teetered like seesaws, the future suddenly became dimmer, and Isaiah had no idea what he wanted to do. His mom had graduated high school with a dream of law but became an assistant – the 80s was a rocky time, especially for black women who had "extravagant" aspirations to become more than what people expected of them. His father had always wanted to pursue education and did so in joining Morgan State's Business Administration department as a professor. Isaiah looked up to both as outstanding figures of excellence in his life, but he didn't want to go down their paths. He never really thought of what he wanted to be – whenever his teachers asked, he always said some shit like the first black man on the moon, or a library assistant. But Isaiah knew he dreamed of more than becoming an assistant, or a professor.

His mom always taught him about civil rights, the power of giving back to marginalized people. He knew more about his own people and their history than any of his peers. He also understood that his mom cared more about Isaiah than he knew by educating him about it. By

giving him the knowledge, he could protect himself. He knew she always wanted him to look out for himself, be surrounded by people who understood his marginality. Had he chosen a white college, she would've pushed for a historically black one instead. That was the kind of woman she was; someone who always fought for herself, her family *and* her people.

Through his friends he'd heard that the president had appointed a black man as the Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff – he didn't know what the title was, or what the guy did, but apparently Powell was the first black man to hold the position. Hearing that filled him with some kind of determination, like he was given the power to become whatever he wanted to be.

He'd thought about it before. Isaiah was always kind of a reluctant leader – he was the president of his class for four years straight only due to his popularity, and he did UN in his junior and senior year for the credit. He helped struggling kids in his cross-country club whenever they felt dejected about their times. He tutored whenever he could because seeing his peer's grades go from a pass to 80 was always encouraging. He liked leading, he liked helping people, even if he was hesitant to do so.

The school counsellor had asked him what he wanted to be when he was a sophomore. He responded halfheartedly, anything to get him back to class – "Probably a professor like my dad." – but the counsellor had seen right through him. She asked what he did after school. Bashfully, he recalled everything he did to help others.

"Why don't you run for president?"

"Of the *United States*?"

She was obviously joking – what kind of counsellor tells kids to do what was practically impossible? – but it kind of stuck with him. He knew that if he wanted to become the president, no one would've taken him seriously without a college degree or military service. It was like going into high school without completing elementary.

But then he spent the summer thinking about it as he spent his free time with the Slovaceks. His mother had bought him a book, *Straight from the Heart*. It hadn't interested him until he cracked it open and got thirty pages in. Jesse Jackson, the first serious African American candidate for president. A political activist in the Civil Rights Movement, a protégé of Martin Luther King, had a Bachelor of Arts in

Sociology and a Masters of Divinity. But he had no military or government experience, which ultimately led to his devastating 1984 loss.

If Isaiah were to run for presidency, he had to become twice as much as his white candidates were. He had to become more American than his white candidates pretended they were. And what was more patriotic than a US Marine?

So he tried signing up for the Marines after graduating. The guy in the office wasn't really an active participant in Isaiah's recruitment process – it felt more like he wanted Isaiah out than in – but Isaiah took home a couple of pamphlets to look over before he solidified his decision. They were trifold sheets describing what the Marine Corps was, what they did, who they fought for.

But he was scared of what his mom would think if she saw them – scared of his mom going off on his ass for trading one institute of oppression for another. He shoved them down the side of his bed and prayed to God she never found them.

But his mom wasn't stupid. Isaiah knew that all too well.

He had plans to build schools and wells for impoverished kids out in rural Angola. It was with a non-profit organisation, and, because of college, they saw him more as a potential employee rather than someone they expected to show up. Whenever his mom asked about Angola, he started out by giving her the bare bones of information. Then she'd get pushy – obviously, her kid was going to another country that wasn't as esteemed as America, she'd have some fears – and he'd get curt in turn. His mom wasn't always strict, but if she suspected something was off, then she'd tear the world apart looking for the truth.

He came home one day from hanging out with his friends before they moved to the West for college. She wasn't in the living room where she usually did her afternoon readings, but she was sitting in the dining room with the Marines pamphlets on the tabletop. Her eyes were teary and she asked with a shaky voice if there was any point in teaching him safety when he'd disregard it so quickly.

She thought he was abandoning her.

Isaiah was grounded for a week – no going out, no Angola, no Marines. His parents tried to decide what to do with him for a few days before his mom suggested the Slovaceks. He hadn't visited in his

senior or junior year due to his workload – taking four APs as a junior wasn't really the easiest thing in the world – and now that he had graduated and was a legal adult, he hadn't planned on going for a few years. The summer was his break until he had to think about college or employment. He was going to spend it with friends; days on the East Coast beaches under the hot sun, hanging out with girls he'd think twice about dating, maybe a trip to Florida where one of his old buddies lived.

But he was grounded, which was still inane to him considering he was eighteen years old. He would've been madder if his parents decided to lock him up in his room for a month, or if they forced him to get a shitty job he never wanted, but going to the Slovaceks didn't seem like the worst punishment ever. He was ambivalent to the idea; he would do the same things he was hoping to do all summer – eat as much as he could, laze around like an old family dog, and swim until his muscles spasmed – just without close friends and the freedom of the big city.

The orchard still looked and smelt the same as it had three years before. The Slovaceks hadn't done anything differently, they never did. They liked to live in constants sustained through established routine – Lily liked baby blue, so the rooms and the barns were only painted in such. Alex prayed to his grandparent's cross every night before dinner, so it had always hung above the doorway between the dining room and the hallway. The guest room, designated to Isaiah whenever he visited, was always dressed in the same sheets, curtains and rugs, pale cream for neutrality. All the same, never changing.

The peach trees were growing, halfway through their life cycle, just sprouting little green fruit from their fragrant pink flowers that Nash always managed to miss. Alongside the trees were the grass fields, teeming with vibrant wildflowers of purples, reds, and deep yellows, just wishing to be run through as they waved to Isaiah from his mom's car.

They stopped in the driveway and Lily was first out the door to greet them. She was wearing a short, lilac dress with worn jeans underneath, a big grin on her pale face framed by her chestnut hair. Her golden ring glittered in the midafternoon sun as she waved.

Isaiah and his mom exited the car with little enthusiasm, but enough happiness to satiate Lily's.

“Hello!” She called, extending her arms out for an embrace. “Amara, how are you?”

His mom smiled and hugged her. “I’m doing just fine.”

They split and Lily turned to Isaiah with an amused smirk. “And Isaiah,” she said. “How are you doing?”

“I’m doing *just* fine,” he said. His mom side-eyed him as Lily laughed a sweet chuckle and hugged him.

“Where’s Alexander?” His mom always liked to full-name Alex, said it was more mature to do so. Isaiah didn’t care much about maturity, especially if it was concerning Alex or Lily. They were the most childlike adults he’d ever known.

“Out in the barn, fixing up his brother’s old truck.” She gestured for them to come inside as she continued to talk, “I told him that piece of shit wouldn’t run, but he’s adamant it will.”

His mom wasn’t taken aback by Lily’s swearing. She was always like that – Isaiah guessed she’d got it from Alex who swore like a drunken sailor gone overboard. Lily was an all-American white girl who fell in love with a Slav from New Jersey, she must’ve picked up some behaviors throughout their marriage. Isaiah’s mom just got used to it over time. Lily was no longer the sweet little girl from high school who used to walk down to the corner store with her. She was a shit stirring, peach-picking American with a proud Slavic husband by her side.

“When did he get it?”

“Oh, a month back. His brother came down with his son for a bit, brought an SUV and made his son drive the truck, then left it here for Alex to fix up and use,” Lily said as she walked through the archway into the kitchen and started filling the kettle. “I think it was going to his son before he…” She broke off, putting the kettle on the already hot stovetop. His mother nodded, like she already knew what happened with Alex’s nephew.

“Sometimes discipline needs to be handed out.” She shot a glare over her shoulder at Isaiah, who rolled his eyes when she turned her back to him. “Maybe Isaiah can lend a hand.”

“Isaiah can help with the peach trees this summer. And cleaning up.” She snapped her fingers like she usually did whenever she

remembered something, “Oh! I need to clean out Alex’s old study and put a bed in.”

They sat down at the old hardwood table. The grooves from when Isaiah accidentally stabbed the table with his fork years ago were still there. He dragged his thumb over them.

“What for?” His mom asked.

“Well,” Lily said with a shrug, “Alex’s nephew will stay with us for a few months. His dad said he needed to get out of New Jersey until he – what did he say? – get his act together.”

“And you’re just taking him in?”

“I mean,” Lily gestured to Isaiah, who wasn’t really listening, “I love having Isaiah over. What’s an extra boy to take care of? Plus, it’s another set of hands I need.”

Isaiah reeled himself in, sitting up straighter in his chair as he began to listen.

“How old is he?” His mom chucked a nonchalant glance at the clock. She had an appointment at six, Baltimore was an hour's drive. She needed to leave before she had even arrived.

“Oh, eighteen, nineteen. He dropped out of high school his junior year, had some issues with the other kids.”

“Or the other kids had issues with him?”

Lily just shrugged. “I like the kid. I’ve never had an issue with him, so I have no qualms. I think he’ll fit in around here, especially if Isaiah can.”

The kettle started whistling, spouting steam from its silver spout. They all shuffled in their seats, and Isaiah’s mom went to stand.

“You’re not staying?” Lily sounded disappointed as she went to pull the kettle off the stovetop and start filling up three mugs. The teabags floated to the top, bouncing with each splash of hot water.

“I’m afraid I can’t. I have a meeting with a client tonight. Fancy dinner, everything.” She waved a loose hand in the air, shouldering her handbag. “Isaiah, come get your bags.”

Isaiah nodded and dashed out to the car to grab his singular suitcase

and school branded duffel bag. Lily and his mother followed shortly thereafter, chatting about life and when they would meet up for a real date. They kissed each other's cheek and hugged, before Isaiah's mom met him on the steps. She looked at him with a tear-threatening gaze before wrapping him tight in a motherly embrace.

"I love you," she said quietly. "I'll call. Enjoy your summer."

She let him go, not before patting him on the back, and walked to her car, stopping to wave once more.

"Come on, let's go inside," Lily offered with a soft smile.

And Isaiah settled right back into routine. The guest room was still as boring as he remembered, but there was a wooden desk in the corner with a chair tucked in under it and a patchwork quilt thrown over the end of the bed. He shoved his new and half-read books into the small bookshelf beside the bed, hung his clothes up in the wardrobe, and put whatever else in the drawers.

Lily let him settle in on his own, checking in on him every other hour or so until dinnertime. Alex had come in and started cooking roast pork and spongy dumplings to sop up the onion and mushroom gravy. Isaiah always liked the particular way Alex cooked the dumplings for him – squishier, sticky enough to get gummed in his teeth. He set up the table like usual, Lily dished up, and they said grace before eating.

The day after, and the next four days after that, were all the same; Isaiah picked up the dead leaf litter and any droppings of little green peach starters that gave up hanging onto the thin branches. Alex let him take a look at the stubborn truck engine, but he couldn't tell this from that and ended up being lulled to sleep in a creaky, old lawn chair by *Jasná zpráva*.

Isaiah liked the simple days like that, where he worked until he had enough and did his own thing for the rest of the afternoon. He liked chilling in his room, the sunlight warming his face as he read history books. He liked sitting in the field and sketching the flowers around him. He liked relaxing in the living room, the quietness interrupted by Lily's show and her occasional chuckle at a joke that really wasn't that funny.

Some might have called it boring. Isaiah thought it was the overwhelming calmness that made it enjoyable.

Isaiah woke to a bang of the screen door and thudding footsteps through the foyer. Tiredly, he squinted at the antique clock hung beside the wardrobe – ten to eleven, a bit later than when he usually woke up.

There was stunted chatter, mainly it was Alex speaking, who sounded less than happy. But that was how he normally sounded, so Isaiah couldn't make a unique comment on that. Besides Alex, there was another voice. Lighter than Alex's deep tone, but rougher around the edges.

Isaiah stretched with a wide jawed yawn, before getting up and cracking the door open.

Alex wasn't speaking in English – he assumed Czech – and whoever he was talking to was responding in the same language, but their words sounded clunky and stiff. The other person seemed less fluent, taking long pauses in between words and before talking, unsure in their proficiency.

"Isaiah?" Lily called out. "Can you come down here, please?"

"Is he awake?" Alex snapped into English. The stairs creaked, and Isaiah took that as his cue to put some pants on. His door squeaked open as he was poking his head through an "*I survived Model UN"* t-shirt. Lily stood in the doorway.

"Hi. Alex's nephew is here, and I'm starting breakfast."

Downstairs, Alex and his nephew started speaking again.

"Okay," Isaiah said. "Just give me a minute."

"Gotcha." She smiled, closing his door over halfway.

Isaiah blew out a terse breath and looked out the window. The blue sky was clouded over with speckled gray puffs, the sun peeking through the breaks and lighting the ground with spatters of dim sunlight. He opened the window halfway, letting the warm breeze drift in, ruffling the embroidered curtains and his dusky blue shirt.

After a moment, he made his way downstairs tentatively. Alex and his nephew had tapered off into silence and the house was quiet. He glanced into the living room. Alex was sitting on the couch, rubbing his forehead with a harsh sigh. There was a suitcase beside the couch – it looked empty, or like there was barely anything in it. Isaiah

continued on, not wanting to bother him, and entered the kitchen. Lily was at the stove, knifing a slice of butter into a warm frying pan. There were eggs and diced vegetables beside her on the counter.

“Omelet?” Isaiah asked, scratching the back of his neck as he approached. Lily jumped, then laughed and glared at him lightheartedly.

“Jeez, Isaiah,” she tutted. “Give a woman some warning. I was going to make scrambled eggs, but if you want an omelet, you can make it yourself.”

“It’s fine.”

Lily glanced over her shoulder, and Isaiah followed the line of her gaze. In the dining room, a boy was sitting at the table. Well, not a boy. A man. He was staring down at the table, finger pad tracing the grooves of the wood. His profile was straight, his nose looked like it had been broken but never healed right. Thin lips flattened into a line and his jaw ticked as he grinded his teeth. His lengthy hair fell by his temples and waved halfway down his nape, a similar color to Lily’s, but the same length as Alex’s.

He was wearing a sleeveless flannel. Isaiah would’ve thought it looked stupid on anyone else, but, for some reason, it fit him. His arms were muscular, though a little flabby at the bicep. He had a tattoo there, just below his out facing deltoid – it looked like one of those lions a ton of European crests had, posing to the left with intertwined tails. Whenever his hand moved across the table, his arms flexed and the lion reared.

In the sudden silence, the man looked over to the kitchen, eyes squinting with a glare.

“Fuck are you looking at?” His voice was deeper in English, a thick New Jersey accent curling around his awkward consonants that English fluency couldn’t quite catch.

Isaiah was taken aback and glanced at Lily, but she had disappeared; the frying pan was the only thing that hinted she was ever there. He turned back to Alex’s nephew and tensed as he stared into his glaring, dark eyes.

“You got a problem?” Alex’s nephew barked.

“Seems like *you* do,” Isaiah spat back as Lily entered the kitchen

again, tying an apron around her waist. She sighed at them and walked over to her nephew before whispering something to him. His brow furrowed as he stared at her, before glancing at Isaiah and standing. He was tall – no taller than Isaiah, maybe an inch or two shorter than him, but his posture made it feel like he was an imposing figure towering above him. He stepped through the archway and stuck his hand out reluctantly. Lily watched from beside the table, looking like she'd told her kid to go make friends in the playground.

Isaiah looked down at the guy's hand. It was rough, calloused, dirt underneath his nails. Along each knuckle were fresh scabs, scrubbed red raw. Hesitantly, Isaiah took it and shook his hand.

"Slovacek."

Isaiah eyed him. He could do last names.

"Nash."

Fortunately, after two pumps up and down, their hands broke apart. Lily shook her head as if it wasn't enough, but Isaiah wasn't looking to appease her by appealing to Slovacek.

"Okay. Nick, why don't you go take your suitcase upstairs? Second door on the left," Lily said.

Slovacek – *Nick* – looked happy enough to leave, and stomped off into the hallway.

"Christ, that kid's gonna be the death of me," she muttered as she approached the frying pan and glared down at the simmering orange liquid that once was butter. She began to crack three eggs into the pan. "He might be like that for a while, but he'll settle."

"He's been here before?"

"A couple of times, years ago."

Isaiah didn't push. The thing about the Slovaceks was that if they wanted to tell him something, they would on their own time. There was no point in dragging it out of them if it was inevitable that he'd know.

He nodded. "Do you need me to do anything?"

"No, thank you. Your eggs will be done soon, okay?"

Isaiah didn't feel like eggs anymore – he didn't feel like eating, period – but he didn't mind hanging around Lily a bit longer. She was always a talkative type, filling awkward silence with her gentle ramblings, and Isaiah grew to appreciate them.

She cooked as they talked about school, life, work, why Isaiah was banished to the Slovaceks. She had laughed loudly when she told him how he hid the pamphlets and then hushed when Isaiah explained why his mom was angry.

"Angola seemed nice, huh?" She said quietly, a joking bite at the end of her comment. Isaiah just smiled.

For the rest of the day, he hadn't done a lot. Alex wanted his hands for the truck – something to do with pulling the carburetor out – and they spent most of the day in the barn. A sweet, twangy, trumpet and mandolin sung song played from the stereo. The song was in Czech, the duo singer's voices feeding beautiful foreign vowels and consonants through the instrumental.

Sometimes, if Isaiah asked, Alex would roughly translate a song or explain it.

"What's this one?" He asked, as he dusted off the truck with a cloth.

"Nikdy se nevrátí pohádka mládí," Alex responded, his mouth moving quickly over the Czech words. Isaiah huffed out a shocked laugh and Alex chuckled at him. "It's a love song, kind of. About youth, fleeting love."

He sang along for a moment before saying, "They say "*Why does fate give us so little love, why does everything remain only in our memories?*", then something about finding comfort in memories."

Isaiah nodded along.

"My babi used to sing this to my grandpa whenever she was mad at him." He smiled at Isaiah's confused look. "She had a boyfriend before they married. Said she loved him more than whatever man gave her a ring."

Isaiah laughed, but only because he could see Lily doing that to Alex whenever he pissed her off.

Around dinner time, Isaiah was lounging on the couch, a book spread open on his chest, as he stared up at the ceiling. He'd given up

halfway through his paragraph when the rich scent of beef stew drifted throughout the house, his hunger overriding any desire to read. Lunch was skipped in favor of washing the old bikes Alex had left behind the barn – "Just in case you wanted to use them" – and so his stomach was grumbling angrily at him.

"Isaiah," Lily called from the kitchen. "Can you tell Nick to come downstairs?"

Isaiah sighed and sat up, dog-earing his book and putting it aside. He hadn't seen Slovacek all day, the guy had been holed up in his room the entire time. It didn't look like he had anything to entertain himself, so what the actual fuck was he doing during the day?

He stomped upstairs, shuffling down the hallway until he got to Slovacek's door. Because he wasn't an asshole, he knocked, but Slovacek didn't answer. He tipped his head back with an exhale and knocked again, before jiggling the door knob – locked.

"Hey!" He yelled through the thin crack of the door. "Dinner's ready."

"Fuck off!'

"Fuck you too then," he muttered, wandering back downstairs.

Alex had set the table for four, mouth-watering food decorating the middle of the tabletop – beef stew, vegetables and pickles, dumplings with Isaiah's preferred kind on its own separate plate. Lily shook her wet hands, wiped them on her pants, and sat down beside Alex.

"Where's Nick?" She asked.

Isaiah shrugged as he sat. He could've told them the truth; *Nick* was being a little bitch and locking himself up in his room like a whiny teenager – for what? He didn't fucking know, but Isaiah didn't want to be caught in the crossfire of Slovacek's misdirected anger if he could help it.

Lily and Alex eyed each other for a second, when they thought Isaiah wouldn't notice, before they held hands for grace.

The next day, Isaiah was sitting at the table scarfing down his breakfast – houska with ham and cheese, and honey tea – when Alex asked him if he could show Slovacek around the orchard.

“Hasn’t he been here before?” He said around a bite of bread.

“When he was fourteen, yeah.” Alex took a sip of tea before continuing, “Nick’s always been a troubled kid. He just needs some time and maybe a push to get used to things.”

Isaiah swallowed harshly, the bread dragging dryly down his throat. He washed it down with the sickly sweet honey tea.

“Can you be that push?”

He sighed, staring down at the butter drenched crumbs on his plate. Isaiah liked helping; he told himself that whenever some kids were a bit hard on themselves or felt like giving up. He never had to tell himself that when someone lashed out at him and gave him hell. He wasn’t a social worker – he was a kid like the rest of them. But he always gave them time to reflect, to act in a proper way.

And Alex knew Isaiah had all the time in the world.

“Yeah, fine.”

Isaiah waited for four hours until Slovacek woke up. The clock read half past one. He could’ve spent all that time being productive – reading, helping Lily out with lunch, going out into the tree plot, or helping Alex out in the barn – but it felt like he was stuck to the couch, waiting and waiting for Slovacek to finally get his ass downstairs.

And when he did, he looked dishevelled. His hair looked like he had combed his hand through it five thousand times over, his shirt rumpled and his boxers baggy. His eyes looked red-rimmed too, drooping with exhaustion.

“How long did you sleep?”

Slovacek jumped, not expecting Isaiah to be right there, and turned to glare at him. “However long I fucking wanted to.”

Isaiah leaned back into the couch. “Alex told me to show you around the place.”

“I know my way around,” Slovacek grumbled, but it didn’t look like he was making any movement to leave, standing his ground right there in the hallway. Isaiah took the fleeting moment to finally take a look at Slovacek; the red line on his nose that looked like a scar, the

light dusting of freckles on his cheeks, his eyes that were actually a deep army green instead of the dark brown he once saw, the gold cross that was slung over his collar, twisted by the clasp.

“You sure? Where’s the tool shed?”

“Does it fucking matter?” He spat, taking a step towards the kitchen, before wheeling back around and pointing in the opposite direction the tool shed was. “That way.”

Isaiah chuckled.

“Fuck are you laughing about?”

He jabbed a thumb over his shoulder. “That way.”

Slovacek stuck his middle finger up at him, “That way,” then walked off to the kitchen.

Isaiah waited another fifteen minutes before he saw Slovacek amble down the hallway again with a dumpling stuck in his mouth and another in his hand.

“Get dressed,” he said to Slovacek’s passing figure.

Slovacek did a jerk off motion with his free hand, grumbling around the dumpling in his mouth, as he went upstairs.

When Isaiah finally went outside, he could smell the earthy tang of incoming rain. He could feel it too; a warm, sticky humidity carried on a cold breeze. In the distant skies, great big clouds rumbled towards the house, but they seemed far enough that they’d come in after sunset. Isaiah sat down on the porch steps and watched as Alex shucked tarps over their family car, a boxy Pontiac 6000, and the bikes.

Alex looked over and frowned. “Where’s Nick?”

“Inside. Told him I’d show him around.”

“And I’m guessing he didn’t want you to?”

Isaiah sighed and shrugged. “We’ll see.”

Alex shook his head and started walking back to the barn. Only then did Slovacek come outside. The screen door banged behind him and Isaiah glanced over his shoulder.

Slovacek was wearing torn jeans with oil splatters by his lap, held up by a simple leather belt, and the same plain, white shirt he slept in.

“Ready?” Slovacek muttered.

“I guess,” Isaiah said as he stood.

He showed him the basics – the tree plot of a hundred and fifty trees (“Used to be fifty,” Slovacek said, breaking his vow of silence. Isaiah responded with a simple, “I know,” which made Slovacek’s face wrinkle with a deep frown), the pale blue barn that washed out against the stormy sky, the path to the river, and the shed they stored all the tools in.

Slovacek was barely a willing participant, but he meandered slowly behind Isaiah, which was something at least. Sometimes he interjected with a question, but it sounded like he was forcing himself to talk instead of being constantly antisocial.

“You come here often?” Slovacek asked, which momentarily stunned Isaiah into silence. He couldn’t even laugh at how it sounded like a shitty pick up line.

“Uh, yeah. My mom brought me here every other summer before junior year.”

When he looked back at Slovacek. He was staring down at the grass beneath his boots. Oh, yeah. Slovacek dropped out junior year. For whatever reason he didn’t know, it must've been bad. He inwardly cursed himself and scratched at the back of his neck.

Slovacek turned his gaze back up to Isaiah.

“Why did she leave you here? Didn’t want to bother with you?”

Isaiah laughed at that. “Fuck you,” he said, lightheartedly. But Slovacek’s unbidden smile was private and small. It was a start. At least he was able to crack the guy, put a dent in his tough guy exterior.

He thought about pushing a little further, thought about asking why Slovacek was here, but that felt like uncharted territory, rough waters neither could traverse.

They ended up in the barn. Alex raised his eyebrows at Isaiah as he watched them enter. Isaiah let Slovacek sit on the lawn chair, and

took a seat on top of a workbench. Isaiah glanced at Slovacek, but he was staring uneasily at the truck, like it had cussed out his entire family.

Again, that was something Isaiah forgot. Lily had told them they brought it down and left it there. It had to have been Slovacek's until… something happened that made his dad give it away.

"Put some music on, will you?" Alex asked, his upper half under the hood as he fiddled with something in the engine bay.

Isaiah fiddled with the stereo system for a bit – he still hadn't quite figured out the fussy bits and knobs – and plugged a random cassette tape in. Some kind of riffy, new wave beat started playing and Alex immediately yelled out in excitement. He sang along to what Isaiah guessed were Russian lyrics.

Slovacek was hiding his grin behind his palm.

Alex looked over at Slovacek, who was flushing with embarrassment, and shook his head. "You should know this song!"

"I do," Slovacek said, a blush mottling up the back of his neck and tickling the tips of his ears. "I'm just not gonna sing it."

"You picked a good band, my friend." Alex pointed at Isaiah as he shimmied his shoulders to the singer's crooning. "Kino will always hold my heart."

Slovacek muttered something in Czech, and Alex responded quickly.

"He said I got the phrase wrong, and that Kino is *bad*," Alex translated when Isaiah thought he wasn't showing how lost he was between their foreign words. "It was a cult classic in the Soviet Union. You," Alex glared at Slovacek, "Should feel lucky that you never got to see them live."

"You did?" Isaiah asked.

Alex shook his head. "No, my grandparents left Czechoslovakia forty or so years ago. Some family is still there, but I never visited."

Isaiah noticed how Slovacek fiddled with his left arm sleeve, pulling it down over his bicep.

Their conversation tapered off after that and Slovacek excused himself

silently. When the door shut behind him, Alex turned to Isaiah.

“So, he’s doing okay?”

“Yeah, I guess. I don’t know exactly.”

Which was completely the truth. Isaiah was good at reading people, taking their shielded body languages and reading them like open books. But *Nick* was an enigma. It was either Isaiah couldn’t get through his hard shell or Slovacek knew he was trying and wouldn’t let him. That was probably it.

“He’ll come around,” Alex said, dipping back under the hood.

“Maybe.”

The rain pattered down after dinner and continued on until the next morning, drenching the soil beneath the bushy Redhaven leaves and muddening the fields. Alex had sighed gratefully as he expressed his love for storms very loudly at breakfast.

Lily told Isaiah and Slovacek to get dressed for church when they were done eating, and he went to his room to pick out something nice. A simple dress shirt and the slacks his mom picked out for his graduation. He, Alex, and Lily convened in the foyer as they waited for Slovacek to come downstairs. Isaiah was getting used to Slovacek taking forever to get dressed, even if it was a little annoying, but Lily seemed impatient, tapping her heeled toe against the wooden floor.

“Why don’t you go check on him?” Alex asked.

Isaiah nodded and rushed upstairs, knocking on Slovacek’s door with haste.

“Give me a second, alright?” Slovacek yelled.

“We’re leaving soon, man. You gotta hurry up.”

He heard Slovacek groan and crack the door open. Through the little sliver, Isaiah could partially see Slovacek’s face and his pale body. His twisted chain looked golden against his skin, and splatters of freckles travelled down his chest. Isaiah tried to not look too hard.

“I don’t have anything to wear,” Slovacek said through gritted teeth like it was painful to admit.

Isaiah just shrugged. “You can borrow something from me.”

“I need a shirt.”

He nodded and went to his room, searching through his wardrobe for a shirt that was big enough to fit Slovacek’s wide shoulders and thicker arms. He had a pale yellow, casual button down that always sat too large on his frame.

Slovacek took it with a brusque smile and, after another five minutes, met the other three downstairs. The shirt fit just right on him, though maybe a little tight on his back, and he was wearing dark jeans with boots. Isaiah could admit that he looked good – as good as a man *could* look. Lily sighed with relief and fiddled with Slovacek’s collar as Alex went out to start the car.

“This looks nice, where’d you get it?”

With a blush on the back of his neck, Nick shrugged.

The drive to church was slow. The rural roads were muddy and the tires kept slipping on the slick ground. Isaiah had never heard Alex swear so much, but Slovacek kept smirking whenever he spat out a string of Czech curses. Slovacek made a sly comment that Alex glared at him for through the rear view mirror and angrily muttered something. Lily just turned back to look at Isaiah and rolled her eyes with a smile.

The church the Slovaceks visited was unlike any church Isaiah went to. His family wasn’t particularly religious but liked to attend service for Christmas and Easter – something to fill their quotas, he guessed. It was never appealing to him; sitting in a stuffy room listening to a man preach ecstatically from the Bible for a bit, give up money when he didn’t know where or what it would go to, and then listen to people sing worship like their lives depended on it. But that was black church. White church just sounded more boring.

And maybe Slovacek agreed, because he spent the entire time grumbling under his breath in a muddle of both languages. Isaiah could pick up on a few words and phrases, namely; “Why the fuck am I here?” and quiet “Oh, my God”s which got him a few glares.

He had a bad attitude the entire time, everyone could sense it because Slovacek had gotten a few side eyes from the older women and parents when he didn’t stand when asked.

At some point, it had gotten to Isaiah. It was rude, the way he was acting was so standoffish and disrespectful to Alex's and Lily's time. And he couldn't ignore the way Slovacek was making eyes at some pretty girl a couple rows ahead of them. Isaiah's chest tightened at that, heart beating wildly. Was Slovacek seriously going to hook up with some girl at church?

"Why'd you come then?" Isaiah whispered when Slovacek closed his eyes and leaned back like he was at home. "No, seriously, why are you here if you don't want to be?"

Slovacek's eyes widened and he glared at Isaiah. "I had to come," he snapped back, and Isaiah didn't know how he kept his voice so quiet yet still filled with so much irritation.

"*No*, you *didn't*."

"If I didn't, they would be on my ass about it when they got back."

"*No*, they *wouldn't*."

"Like you know them so much fucking better than me."

"Maybe I do."

The pastor was only halfway through his speech about trusting God and his messages when Slovacek abruptly stood up and left with a string of curses. The back rows watched him leave before turning their attention back to the stunned pastor.

Lily turned to Isaiah with a frown and a questioning look. Isaiah just shook his head.

"Okay, then. Seems like someone didn't like my verses," the pastor joked.

The congregation laughed, and the pastor continued.

Service ended midafternoon, much to the dismay of a few whose lunch plans were cancelled in favor of church. The Slovaceks spent some time talking to a few friends, farmers they knew and old high school peers, but even after that, Slovacek hadn't come back from wherever he ran off to.

They were standing in the parking lot, which was more of a grassy knoll designated as the parking lot. Families were clearing out as

quickly as they could to get ready for dinner. Lily didn't look stressed about Slovacek's prolonged absence, though Alex seemed displeased as he kept rummaging through the car and muttering in terse Czech, which Lily continually frowned at.

"You don't know Czech?" Isaiah asked her.

Lily shook her head, her eyebrows twitching into a frown.

"I'd like to, but it seems difficult. I wish that didn't limit me," Lily said. "Sometimes I think Alex feels isolated without someone to talk to. Nick knows it, though, so maybe that helps."

"How did they learn?"

"Well, Alex's mother only spoke Czech at home, then she taught Alex's father, and they taught their sons. It was so funny; Alex told me about this one time that his brother, Adam, couldn't remember an English word for his Biology presentation and started swearing in Czech, but…"

"Let me guess," Isaiah said, "The teacher knew Czech?"

"She was Slovak. Apparently, they have the same word for *bitch and whore*," she hushed into a whisper as an old woman tottered by. Isaiah laughed. "So, I'm not really surprised that Nick is Adam's son. They're so alike."

"In what way?"

Lily's jaw ticked as she thought, her fingers tightening around the strap of her handbag. "They feel angry at times, with no other way to let it out besides physical outlets."

"Is that why he's here?"

"That's not my story to tell," she said simply.

After that, Slovacek decided to show up. His shirt was rumpled and the last two buttons were unfastened – Isaiah could see a sliver of skin as he walked over, a dark patch of hair and a mole. He quickly tore his eyes away.

"Where were you?" Alex barked out.

Slovacek said something quickly in Czech, and Alex shook his head, his face rippling with sheathed annoyance.

“Moj boze,” he muttered as he got back into the car.

The car ride was quiet, the air in the cabin tense and thick. Alex wasn’t speaking, besides a few remarks about the muddy roads, Slovacek wasn’t making off-hand comments, and Lily was staring straight ahead, her hands clasped in her lap. Isaiah was stewing in the awkward tension, but he was more confused as to how it spurred. Slovacek had obviously done something bad – ran off during church, and maybe fucked that girl he was making eyes at? – and everyone could tell, but they weren’t arguing about it. They weren’t arguing about Slovacek’s displeasure about church, they weren’t arguing about why he came despite that.

It was like Lily and Alex weren’t going to discipline Slovacek, like they were being careful with him, like he was a ticking time bomb and any sudden movement would make him go critical.

Even when they were back at the Slovaceks’ home, the rooms were too thick to exist in. Lily noticed Isaiah’s discomfort, gave him a pot of vegetables and a peeler, and told him to go peel them outside. He sat on the porch steps and pulled out a washed potato, slowly dragging the peeler over the splotchy skin.

The sky was yellowing on the horizon, clear of clouds, a direct contrast of the morning when the sky was bathed in a rich, dark vapor.

The door opened behind him and someone stepped out onto the porch. And Isaiah knew – when had he begun to know whose footsteps were whose? Because, for some stabbing reason, Isaiah could recognize Slovacek’s wide, thudding, confident steps.

He walked past him and trudged down the steps. He was wearing a clean tee and fresh jeans that Isaiah had never seen. It looked like he was going somewhere.

“Where are you going?”

Slovacek stopped and glanced over his shoulder. “What’s it to you?”

Isaiah just shrugged, but Slovacek turned his body completely to Isaiah. The sun lit him from behind, highlighting the sharp edges of his hair and body, the line of his broad shoulders and thin hips, like a golden halo.

“I’m going out.”

“Gonna see that girl?”

“Is that your business?”

“With what car?”

Confusion flashed over Slovacek’s face, and then settled into veiled irritation.

“Fuck.” He sighed and walked back up to the porch. Isaiah was expecting him to go back inside, lock himself in his room, but he also wasn’t surprised when Slovacek sat down beside him on the steps.

From the corner of his eye, he could see Slovacek’s gaze following the movement of his hand on the peeler, dragging it over the potato.

“Do you want to help or are you just gonna sit there on your ass?”

“Sit here on my ass.”

They fell into a swift silence, besides Slovacek’s knee jiggling and his boot heel rhythmically thumping against the second step down. He looked like he didn’t want to talk, but his thoughts were rattling around in his brain like they needed to get out. Isaiah didn’t know someone could think so fucking loud.

His hand stilled and he looked at Slovacek, who glanced back and frowned. “What?”

Isaiah just shrugged and put the peeled potato back in the pot, fishing out a carrot instead. He started to peel it as Slovacek continued to stare at him.

“Why’d your mom leave you here?” Slovacek asked.

Isaiah snorted in shock and looked at Slovacek, whose frown was creasing into deep wrinkles between his eyebrows.

“She found out I wanted to join the Marines.”

“Oh.”

It wasn’t an invitation to keep talking, but Isaiah decided it was. “She was so fucking mad, she grounded me. At least she didn’t slap the black off my ass, but I swear she was about to.”

“Why would she be mad at that?”

Isaiah shook his head, turning back to the carrot in his hands, twirling it around in his palm. “She thinks the Marines oppresses black men. I mean, they couldn’t train with the white guys until forty-something years ago.”

Slovacek was listening attentively, though his body was still angled inwards, his shoulders hunched.

“I guess she thought I didn’t respect her teaching me to protect myself from white oppression.”

“White oppression? Fuck is that?”

“Like not letting black recruits train with the white recruits because we were *inferior* to them, letting white men pick us apart while spitting racist insults at us, stupid shit like that.”

Slovacek visibly tensed. “Oh. She left you here just because of *that*.”

“I guess. Doesn’t make sense to me, either.”

They lulled into another bout of silence and Isaiah took the time to finish peeling the carrot. He put it in the pot and grabbed another potato, dragging his thumb over the skin to flick off some dirt. Slovacek was watching his hands, he could tell, and he wasn’t leaving at least.

“What are you here for?” Isaiah chanced it. At worst, Slovacek would’ve told him to fuck off and storm back inside, which Isaiah could’ve handled. At best, well–

Slovacek raised his thumb to his mouth and chewed on his nail for a moment, before dropping it like he was remembering to stop himself. He, instead, glared down at the grass below the porch steps, his teeth worrying his dry bottom lip.

“I, uh.” Slovacek scratched the back of his neck, his skin reddening with each drag of his nails. “Got roped into a… thing.”

Isaiah stopped peeling the potato to watch Slovacek.

“Neighbors down the block owned a beauty of a car, a Ford Thunderbird.” As he spoke, Slovacek’s fidgeting got worse and Isaiah itched to just grab his hand and stop him. “My mom’s boyfriend wanted me to boost it so he could sell it for a fix. Got caught with the screwdriver in the ignition. Guy who owned the car, Tino, broke two

of my ribs, then I beat his ass."

The story sounded extravagant and it didn't feel real at any point. He knew New Jersey had high crime rates, he didn't doubt that, but some of the story felt lost in translation, like there was less to it than whatever Slovacek was making it out to be – or maybe more he was leaving out.

"I was gonna get charged for assault, nearly sent to juvenile for it, but my dad fought for custody. Said that it wouldn't have happened if I wasn't with my mom," his voice cracked midway, and he turned his gaze up to the apricot sky. "So, I got put with my dad, but if I did anything else, I was hitching a free ride straight to prison."

"But that's not why you're here."

Slovacek shook his head and looked down between his feet, shoulders hunching. Isaiah was so close to telling him to stop speaking, just because it looked like it was painful to talk about, but Slovacek kept going as if Isaiah opened a floodgate and Slovacek couldn't stop it.

"I punched some guy outside a bar. A big suit, he got me good, but I ran away before he could call the police," Slovacek croaked. "My dad found out. Said he was gonna send me to the Army or here. So I came here."

Isaiah nodded, finished with the potato, gave Slovacek all the space to speak until he was out of words. But Slovacek just stood up and dusted his jeans off.

"Are you coming to dinner?"

"Maybe. I guess." Slovacek sneered at Isaiah's small smile. "Don't make it fucking weird."

"No, I'm just surprised." Isaiah laughed.

"Fuck you."

And Slovacek did go to dinner.

Lily looked shocked when Slovacek walked into the kitchen. He had changed into his worn jeans and a looser shirt, more relaxed. Alex looked somewhat pleased, and smiled when Slovacek sat down across from him. When Isaiah held his hands out for grace, Slovacek took one in his own without any pressure. His palm was rough, coarse

against Isaiah's, and the pads of his fingers were dry. Isaiah glanced over at Slovacek and found Nick was already looking at him with a soft, private look on his face. It only lasted a moment and Slovacek turned his gaze down to the table, but it felt like he'd gripped Isaiah's throat and clenched it as tight as he could. Isaiah's heart reared in his chest, quickening every other beat, and he tried to stamp it down.

It was nothing.

Three days passed quickly. Most of Isaiah's time was spent ambling about in the orchard, cleaning up the trees. The peaches were ripening, their colours fleshy and yellow, beautifully contrasting against the bright, emerald green leaves. Summer was settling in and the days were getting hotter. Isaiah had to borrow one of Lily's handkerchiefs because he couldn't stand the constant dripping of sweat that Slovacek never seemed to be bothered by. In fact, he seemed completely fine under the hot, glaring sun, like it was just another spring day. It was annoying every time Isaiah had to take a break and lounge under the cool shadow of an oak tree while Slovacek kept on like it was barely affecting him.

In town, every second Thursday of the summer months, they held a farmers market to celebrate… something. Lily said it was an old tradition the British settled townspeople did to honor their crops or some stupid shit like that, and just kept the celebration until modern times. The meaning was lost in translation somewhere along the way, but Lily and Alex loved going to the markets, and Isaiah liked it too.

"Are you coming tomorrow?" Lily asked at dinner, a sly grin on her face as if she already knew what he was going to say.

"Come on," Isaiah said. "You know me."

"I *do* know you, maybe too well." She turned to Slovacek. "Do you want to come?"

"Sounds stupid," Slovacek said, then, "Is there funnel cake?"

Alex laughed. "C'mon, kid. This is Pennsylvania. Of course there's funnel cake."

Isaiah was awoken before midday with the rattle of the water pipe and the sputtering of water from the bathroom next door. He knew Slovacek liked to take thirty minute showers, so he rested his eyes for an extra hour before getting up.

The bathroom was still damp with condensation, the fan rattling extra hard as it pumped out the excess moisture from Slovacek's long shower. He wiped a hand over the clouded mirror, catching his own tired eyes in the hazy reflection. Since arriving at the Slovaceks, his complexion had no doubt darkened under the harsh sun, and when he pulled his shirt off, he had distinct tan lines around his neck and biceps. His hair had also grown from when he had cropped it for his graduation ceremony, he could pull a curl and it would reach the tip of his ear from his head, but he didn't feel the itch to cut it down to the length it was.

His face was scrubby though, a spattering of facial hair growing around his mouth and up his jaw. He preferred himself clean shaven, and felt that the smoothness was more appealing than the allure of a beard. He'd always struggled with getting his skin to agree with him though. His dad had issues with ingrown hairs whenever he shaved, and it seemed to have passed down onto Isaiah. At least his dad was kind enough to teach Isaiah all the things he did to get a clean shave; hot compresses, shaving butters, single razor blades, the whole shebang. And it worked – Isaiah swore by his routine. Anyone could tear it from his cold dead hands, because he'd never give it up.

He still had an hour until Lily would start rounding everyone up to leave, and shaving rarely took longer than twenty minutes.

His routine was quick, simple. Just a couple steps to prepare his skin, then shave, and moisturize. But the entire routine depended on the fact that he had a working razor and, when he pulled his razor out of his caddy, there was a distinct rust on the single blade. He had no replacement blades in his caddy, and he wouldn't be caught dead using a disposable from the pack under the sink.

"Fuck," he muttered, inspecting the rust under the fluorescent light. There was no point in risking it.

"What's wrong?" Slovacek suddenly appeared in the doorway, staring at the razor in his hand. He was dressed, but his hair was damp, sticking to his jaw and neck. A single droplet rolled down the side of his temple, and Isaiah's mouth grew wetter at the sight and he forced himself to look away.

"Blade's rusty," he said, slipping the blade out of the handle and wrapping it loosely in toilet paper.

"Just use the disposable ones. No need to be fucking fancy."

“I can’t,” Isaiah said. He really didn’t want to have this argument, especially with a white kid who shaved with disposables. The gory thought of razor bumps just made him shudder.

“Why? Got sensitive skin?” Slovacek snorted.

“I got *my* skin.” Isaiah glared at him, and Slovacek’s face fell. He was thankful to watch Slovacek turn and walk away, his clomping footsteps banging down each step – seriously, how could a guy be that fucking loud?

He shoved his razor handle back into his caddy. He’d just ask someone to buy him blades when they went out next.

Lily was at the table, pouring over a folder and scattered papers. An empty mug sat beside the papers, alongside a small plate with a variety of homemade pickles. She was dressed to go out; a pink tee-shirt with a dumb peach pun on the front tucked into a green, plaid skirt.

When she looked up, she jolted in surprise with a gasp.

“Oh, my God, Isaiah.”

Isaiah laughed, clutching the doorframe as he tried to not double over.

“What’s so fucking funny?” Slovacek said behind him, which jolted Isaiah – the suddenness of Slovacek’s proximity sent his heartbeat scurrying, and he quickly got ahold of himself and stood up straight.

“I’m getting too used to your stomping, Nick,” Lily grumbled, tucking the papers back into the folder and taking her dishes to the kitchen.

“I’m not that loud.”

Isaiah turned and smiled at Slovacek. “You kind of are.”

“Fuck you,” Slovacek said, but his tone was light. There was no snark behind his words, no clumsiness around the awkwardness of his meaning. He sounded content.

Alex came lumbering down the stairs, yawning. Slovacek walked away from Isaiah and started ribbing Alex in Czech – Isaiah could only tell he was ribbing him from the way Slovacek was smirking and Alex was frowning in turn.

“Jdi do prdele,” Alex groaned, ignoring Slovacek’s following chirping as they walked out the front door.

Lily sighed, appearing by Isaiah’s side. “Having two boys was enough. Now I have three.” Isaiah frowned sarcastically, and Lily pushed his face away with a chuckle.

“Jdi do prdele,” she echoed. Isaiah could only guess what it meant, and he was probably correct in his rough estimate.

The town boulevard was lined with booths of all kinds; fruits and vegetables, handmade toys for children, jewellery and crafts, jam and confectionery. Isaiah was there for a very specific booth that sold hot sauce made of ghost chilis and pawpaw — really, he liked anything pawpaw flavored – but he ended up just walking around, trying to pretend like he wasn’t lost in the crowd of loud families, tired farmers, and young couples who kept kissing up on each other.

Lily and Alex had found Slovacek a funnel cake stand before leaving to look at the produce for something Alex called “Borscht Friday,” which was just an excuse to make a shitton of borscht and eat it for three days straight. Isaiah wasn’t particularly excited, but the two of them seemed overjoyed.

Slovacek was hanging around Isaiah, though. His five funnel cakes were long gone and he was condemned to hovering around awkwardly. He looked as lost as Isaiah did, but particularly disoriented in the crowds. Isaiah had to remind himself that Slovacek wasn’t used to routine, he didn’t know how to go about things, especially in a rural town. He watched him for a second, before nudging him with his shoulder and catching his wandering gaze.

“You okay?”

Slovacek turned and stared at him like he asked the dumbest fucking question on Earth. “Yeah, I’m fine,” he grumbled.

Isaiah just shrugged, and started looking through vintage books from a stand made out of an old wagon. He half-expected Slovacek to wander off and go find somewhere to sit out the time, but he stuck around. Isaiah wasn’t complaining, Slovacek wasn’t too bad company when he wasn’t talking or being a dick.

But fifteen minutes into Isaiah’s book scrounging, Slovacek disappeared. Like a snap of his fingers, he vanished into the trudging

crowd without another word. Which Isaiah *also* wasn't complaining about. He thought Slovacek looked bored anyway.

He spent another fifteen minutes wandering the miscellaneous stands, chatting with people, learning about the intricacies of the records vs. cassettes argument from two bickering men divided by a table covered in old electronics. He was invested in the argument for a while, eavesdropping as he picked through the cassette tapes they had — he thought maybe Alex would want one, but he'd only ever heard the guy listen to Slavic music exclusively, so Kenny Rogers was off the table unless he started rapping Russian over techno beats.

After a while, or when the two guys stopped arguing, Slovacek appeared at his side again with an irritated look on his face. In his hand was a plastic shopping bag from the big name supermarket down the street. Isaiah could only guess what he got, because anything else, they were surrounded by; food, drinks, and a crap ton of homemade stuff to satiate the Amish. Whatever Slovacek got fell outside of the menu, and that was a few things Isaiah could've named.

"Where's Aleš?" Slovacek asked. Isaiah had never heard someone call Alex *that*, it was a little jarring.

"Alex? Produce, still. Gotta get the perfect beets," he joked, but Slovacek didn't laugh. He sucked air through his gritted teeth and gestured towards the plastic bag. "What did you get?"

"When did you decide it was your business?"

Isaiah stared at him with a frown. What actually was his issue? Slovacek seemed to continually revert back into himself like a big, dumb, angry turtle that bit at anyone that showed concern or interest. It was annoying Isaiah, the way Slovacek seemed to be opening up and then snap back without warning, destroying any semblance of improvement he may have shown. Maybe those smiles and his calm tone were just momentary visions of what could've been, had Slovacek not been dropped on the fucking head as a kid.

But then Slovacek sighed, his shoulders slumping with internal defeat, and started rifling through the bag. He pulled something out and handed it to Isaiah. It was a small, olive green and white box with *ASTRA* written on the front.

Christ, Slovacek bought him razor blades.

He looked up at Slovacek, and maybe his vision had been blurry

before because he could see him a bit more clearly. Slovacek was gazing back at him, a frown slowly burrowing its way on his face as Isaiah didn't speak for a moment or two.

"Thanks," he choked out. "Thanks, man, I…"

"You said you didn't have blades."

"Well, yeah, but still—"

"It's nothing. Don't make it something," Slovacek grumbled, turning to look around the boulevard.

But Isaiah's gaze was still locked on Slovacek. Maybe he misjudged him. Yeah, he was a fucking asshole and cocky as shit, but Isaiah forgot the possibility that it could've been a front to shield everyone from seeing something else. Something vulnerable, something intimate. Someone who cared for others without needing to think twice about whether it was out of character or not.

"Ahoj," Slovacek yelled to someone in the crowd.

Isaiah turned to watch Alex shoulder his way through with Lily close behind. They both carried totes of fresh, bagged vegetables and fruit that Isaiah held himself back from tearing into. They looked ripe, juicy with flavor.

Alex chuckled. "*Ahoj*."

"Ahoj, Isaiah," Lily called, rolling her eyes at her husband and his nephew.

"Ahoj, Lily," Isaiah echoed. The word felt clunky in his mouth and stuck behind his teeth, unfamiliar and foreign. But it felt natural, like it fit. Like it was meant to be rough and imperfect.

Slovacek snorted and Isaiah glared at him.

"What was wrong with that?"

"No, nothing." Slovacek smiled.

Alex sighed, shifting his grip on the totes. "Are we done? I'm about to drop these."

By the next day, Isaiah was already sick of borscht. He used to love it

whenever he visited, scarfing down an extra bowl after his first every night until they ran out. He used to help Lily cook it; peeling the beetroot and roasting them, simmering the stew and sneaking sips of red wine behind Lily's back. Moments he revered once lost themselves to the shifty sands of time and he lost his adoration of borscht.

The sourness and the chunkiness of the starchy potato wasn't as appetising compared to Alex's more infamous dishes, like the cold česnečka he made in the cooler months, or, Isaiah's favourite, smažený sýr with tartar sauce on the side. In Isaiah's defense, he'd also once eaten twelve bowls of borscht in a single week and vomited a liquid that looked unusually like it; pure, radioactive red. That might've added to his dislike of it.

The borscht wasn't sitting right in his stomach. He could feel it sludging around in his belly as he trudged down the treeline. The sun was hot against his nape and the stinging rays burnt through his thin, white shirt. He wiped away a bead of sweat with a groan. Slovacek was walking on the other side of the peach trees, through the middle of the row. Isaiah saw him in flashes: his dark blue, New Jersey tee; his hand pushing his dark hair back, slick with sweat and water from his late shower; his muscles flexing with each minute movement; his pretty eyes as they caught Isaiah's, brightening in the splotchy sunlight.

A chunk of the peach trees had developed brown rot – Alex had blamed it on the week-long rain that hit them before June, and asked Isaiah and Slovacek to pick off the rotten fruit and leaves before he "pruned the shit out of them," his words.

Isaiah stopped at the tool shed, picking up a big cardboard box and punching it into shape. He dragged it to the area Alex sectioned off with thin rope.

"So, what am I looking for?" Slovacek asked, eyeing one tree.

Isaiah stood beside him and inspected the tree. It looked fairly healthy besides the wilted leaves and pruny, mousy fruit. He reached out, plucking a peach from the twig and held it out to Slovacek.

"Like this. They'll have a big, brown spot and it looks fuzzy." He dragged his finger around the spot on the peach. "Some trees in the area probably aren't infected, but just check all of them anyway."

He threw it into the cardboard box and started pulling at twigs and thin branches he could snap off. Isaiah had done the same thing once

before, years ago when they had fewer trees and less fallback. It was a simple process, but took a day or two to fully go through the trees before Alex pruned them. Isaiah could probably do it in a day if he had the energy to do so, but his stomach was still a roiling pot of sickly stew, bread, and beer. He tried to sleep in, but Alex was adamant they clean the trees up before the rot spread.

Isaiah finished a tree while Slovacek was still going through his first. His hands were unsure, grasping at healthy branches and twisting peaches around to see if they were hiding any spots on their back.

“It’s fine, dude. You don’t have to check every single peach. Alex will go through them after, anyways.”

“I know, just…” Slovacek blew air out through his lips and started plucking peaches with more confidence.

By the time the sky started staining a bright, lemon yellow, the cardboard box was almost full. It was mainly Isaiah’s work, but Slovacek had contributed enough that they had gotten through thirty-seven trees out of the fifty or so.

Isaiah was still sifting through the leaves when he heard Alex call out from the end of the orchard.

“Lily’s brother is here,” he yelled, his voice echoing through the cooling air.

Beside him, Slovacek groaned outwardly and rubbed his face.

“What? Don’t like him?”

“Have you met the guy?” Slovacek said. When Isaiah shook his head, he continued. “He’s a fucking asshole. Always hated my guts.”

Isaiah looked over at Slovacek. His face was drenched with cooling sweat, his shirt clinging wetly to his back, and there was a spattering smudge of sludgy peach striped on his cheek that Isaiah itched to wipe off. He was staring at a peach in his hands, fingertips grazing the circular, fuzzy rot on its skin – his forearm tensed as if he was holding back from throwing it at the ground.

“You can skip dinner if you want.” Isaiah shrugged and Slovacek eyed him incredulously.

“You’re always up my ass about coming to dinner, and now you don’t

want me to go."

"You said your uncle-in-law was an asshole."

Slovacek held a finger up at him. "He ain't fucking related to me."

Isaiah snorted. "*Okay*. Just don't go to dinner, it's fine."

"Oh, so you're tryna get rid of me now?"

He glared at Slovacek with a stunned grin, wondering if this guy was actually serious. He laughed and put his dirty hands on his hips.

"Maybe I am. What are you gonna do about it?"

There was a moment in which Isaiah thought Slovacek was just gonna turn away and keep plucking the rotten peaches, but that moment never fruited and, instead, Slovacek threw the mushy peach at Isaiah's face. He barely had a second to react, but moved a few inches to the left in time for the peach to just graze his cheek.

The silence was astounding.

"Oh, fuck you," Isaiah huffed, quickly bending down and grabbing a peach from the cardboard box. He aimed, shot, and scored as it hit Slovacek's forehead harder than Isaiah was expecting. There was a splotch of mousy yellow peach splatter and a red mark left behind.

Slovacek's jaw dropped as he wiped his hand across his forehead, shaking the rotten peach off his hand. His nose wrinkled and he exhaled.

"Fuck, that smells like shit!" He yelled, before rushing to grab another peach and throw it at Isaiah.

Isaiah ducked and grabbed two more from the box before running off between the trees. His sense of direction was lost, the trees slowly clouding into a green blur as he sprinted through them. All that was centering him was Slovacek's yelling and yelps of manic laughter coming from far behind him.

"Come back here, you dick!"

Isaiah's footsteps were loud against the floor, boots crunching the leaves and fallen peaches squishing underfoot. He made it down five rows before stopping behind a taller tree. The world spun around him quickly, and he huffed out a bout of quiet chuckles. He panted

heavily, breath lost in his sprint, and his chest heaved as his lungs overworked.

Slovacek's pounding steps had quietened. Silence filled the orchard besides the occasional bird tweet and ruffle of leaves in the gentle breeze.

Isaiah inhaled a harsh breath and turned around to come face to face with a dark blue tee and a scruffy neck. He glanced up at Slovacek's grinning face, before pushing him to try and run away. But Slovacek had grasped onto Isaiah's arm and pulled him backwards. Something must've happened — Slovacek slipped on something, or he lost his center of balance — because suddenly Isaiah was flat on his chest atop Slovacek.

Slovacek's grasp moved from Isaiah's arm to his waist and he flipped them over. Isaiah landed hard on his back with a groan, and tried to grab a hold of Nick's shoulders to roll them over again, but Slovacek was heavy atop him. His hands gripped onto Isaiah's waist, holding him flush to the ground – he wouldn't have been surprised if he bruised tenderly under Slovacek's tight fingers. The air was cool, but Isaiah's body was running red hot. Where skin and weight touched, sparks flickered. His heart was beating crazily, his breathing a similar rhythm of swiftness.

Slovacek's finger tips grazed up Isaiah's waist to where his shirt had ridden up ever so slightly, and, when Isaiah looked at Slovacek's face, he looked entranced, lost in the tangle of his own thoughts. There was a deepening flush on Slovacek's pale cheeks, a peachy red of ripe apples. Isaiah wanted to bite the skin there – see what Slovacek would do, see if he would get redder.

Slovacek's brow twitched into a furrow and he pushed himself up and away from Isaiah's warming face. His thighs squeezed Isaiah's, leaving him breathless when his gut set aflame with shallow desire.

"You got peach on me." Slovacek's mouth did something that almost resembled a pout – and he looked adorable.

Isaiah burst out into bright laughter. "You started it, you little shit."

"*And* I finished it." Slovacek's usual shit eating grin found his face and he stood up. Isaiah, for a second, missed the weight atop him. "Where's the hose?"

"Barn."

Isaiah watched Slovacek walk off in the direction of the barn until he disappeared amongst the trees. When he was out of sight, Isaiah exhaled hard and thunked his head back against the leaf-covered ground. The world was still spinning around him, and his chest was constricting against his breathless lungs. The blood travelling to his face, and downward, had settled back into an even cycle. He sighed and hauled himself up.

Slovacek was already at the barn once Isaiah reoriented himself. The hose was pumping a uniform flow out of the nozzle, and he positioned it over his head. The water splashed against the top of his head, flattening his hair, and flowed down his body. His shirt was soaked in seconds, the dark fabric sticking to the smooth planes of his muscles.

Isaiah swallowed around the lodge in his throat and approached Nick, extending his hand for the hose. Slovacek passed it over with a smirk before he started to scrub his skin and clothes with his hands.

Isaiah's shirt was tight against his skin as he sprayed himself with the water, and, after bearing a few seconds of the cramped feeling, he peeled his shirt off. Slovacek turned away from him, thankfully, and Isaiah shut the water off to start washing the peach off his skin.

"I'm gonna smell like this for fucking days, man," Slovacek grumbled, shaking his hair like a wet dog. The splatter hit Isaiah in the eyes and he groaned.

"Watch your fucking fur, Slovacek," Isaiah said, wiping his face with his palm. He started wringing his shirt out when Slovacek turned around. He had a disoriented look on his face momentarily, but it wiped off into a grin as he glanced down at Isaiah's body.

"Who's the mutt?" Slovacek laughed, and Isaiah frowned at him, wondering what the fuck that meant. "Look at your ass. You've been rolling around in the dirt, huh?" He snorted.

Isaiah glanced behind his shoulder at his ass. It was covered in dirt, leaves, peach from when he fell and squished one. He glared at Slovacek, who was still grinning like it was the funniest thing in the world.

"Your fault, anyway."

"Shouldn't have tried to get rid of me, dick."

He groaned. "Looks like I can't. Come to dinner then, what do I care?"

“Thank you for the invitation,” Slovacek said with a smirk.

“Yeah, whatever.”

Isaiah was drenched six ways to Sunday, even after laying in the setting sun for twenty minutes after dragging the brown rot peaches to Lily’s fertilizer bins. Slovacek had ribbed him for the remaining time they spent outside, muttering stupid shit about Isaiah until he told him to shut up. When they got closer to the house, closer to Lily’s brother, Slovacek actually went quiet. Isaiah was glancing at him every so often to check on him, but only his unusual silence was telling a story – his face was stone; not even a furrow or a glint in his eye that told Isaiah something was wrong.

When Alex met them on the porch, he eyed them incredulously with a raised eyebrow like he could tell what happened – and he probably could.

“What were you guys up to?” He asked.

“Picking the rot,” Isaiah said.

“Sure looks it.” He glanced up and down Slovacek’s frame with a glare, before sighing. “Go shower. Dinner’s ready in a bit.”

Isaiah let Slovacek shower first, even though he *did* throw the first peach. He quickly finished with his own shower, dressed in a nicer shirt and jeans, and headed downstairs.

The living room was bright with laughter and warming comfort. Lily was sitting on the couch next to a man that looked exactly like her. There was a pretty, blonde woman beside him, their hands intertwined. She was watching a young girl on the two-seater who had a Gameboy in her hands and a monkey doll in her lap.

Slovacek was sitting beside the girl, watching the Gameboy screen like it was a riveting drama show, his eyes wide and his head nodding along to whatever she was babbling about. Isaiah watched him for a moment, his stomach warming and fluttering, like the domesticity of seeing someone who could snap easier than a twig act so tranquil in calm, private moments was like inviting Isaiah into a locked home, into a home Slovacek didn’t want him entering before.

“Ah, this is Isaiah,” Lily said, gesturing for Isaiah to come over.

He stepped over to the three of them and smiled at Lily's brother and his wife as Lily introduced him.

"It's lovely to meet you," he said, shaking their hands.

Lily introduced them (Rowan, Abigail, and their daughter, Eliana), and the four of them devolved into a conversation about the summer, what they were doing with the spare time, where Isaiah would go to college. Lily's brother was simple to talk to, though underneath that it seemed he was overprotective of his wife and daughter. His words about them were harsh and abrasive, critical of their actions he deemed wrong, such as his wife doing an arts major instead of something in business, or his daughter getting a behavior comment on her report card.

Slovacek was right. The guy was a fucking asshole, gradually peeling back his layers until Isaiah could see his rotten core. He bit down his and Lily's more vague disgust of him, smiling tightly at each disgusting word Rowan spat.

They moved to the dining room as dinner finished cooking; Dutch chicken pot pie – Lily's Pennsylvanian staple –, a side of cucumber salad drenched in sour cream, and a homemade apricot lemonade Slovacek immediately lunged for.

"So, how are you, Nicholas?" Abigail asked in a quiet lull. Isaiah was stunned at the name, Nicholas, and Slovacek seemed like he was miffed by it.

Slovacek looked up from his half-empty plate. Isaiah had been watching him scarf down his cucumber salad in less than five minutes with an adored smile hidden behind his glass.

"Yeah, I'm okay," he said with a shrug.

"You graduated this year?"

Rowan glared at his wife, and she seemed to wilt in her chair. "*Honey*, Nicholas dropped out. I told you this, didn't I?"

Abigail nodded, and stared down at the table. Slovacek looked furious, stabbing a cucumber on the tines of his fork. Rowan seemed to level his gaze with Slovacek's and a tense staredown was occurring over the table. The tension in the air thickened, and Isaiah rubbed at his neck to relieve himself of the weight.

“I’m sorry,” Abigail said, her voice stuffy and quiet. “I didn’t know.”

“It’s fine,” Nick bit out.

After that, dinner was spent in relative silence, besides the moments of meaningless chatter, and the silence continued on until after.

The adults retreated back to the living room when Alex asked Isaiah and Slovacek to clean the dishes up. Isaiah was already on his feet so he didn’t mind doing them, but Slovacek had disappeared alongside the others. He sighed at the workload in the sink, dirty dishes piled up to the tap. *You fucking owe me*, he thought as he glared up at the heavens.

When he was done, he padded into the living room and poked his head in. Lily and Abigail were lost in their own conversation as Alex and Rowan watched the television with idle talk.

Lily glanced up at the door and smiled at Isaiah.

“Where’s Nick?” He asked.

“Out front, I think,” Lily responded before going back to her conversation with Abigail.

Isaiah stepped out of the house and onto the porch. The dusky night sky was sparkling under the glowy haze of twinkling stars, moonlight the only source illuminating the peach trees. Isaiah could make out the tops of the trees, the outline of waving leaves and outgrowing branches. He shivered against the chill breeze and crossed his arms. To his left was a soft, gentle chatter.

Slovacek was sitting beside Eliana on a wooden bench, talking to her as she played with her monkey doll. She was muttering something Isaiah couldn’t hear, but Slovacek’s deeper, louder voice travelled further.

“Don’t worry about it, yeah? Your dad’s not like your mom, but he’s always gonna be there for you,” Slovacek said.

Eliana asked something and handed the doll to him. In response, Slovacek looked out to the orchard with a frown, gripping the doll tight. Isaiah could see his profile in the glow of the moonlight: Slovacek’s straight, stubbled jaw Isaiah wanted to rub his cheek against; his furrowed brow that softened whenever Isaiah walked into a room; the bow in his thin upper lip, the way his lips look chapped

and blushed, like someone had kissed him bruised.

Suddenly, he thought that he wanted to kiss him bruised. And maybe that was a sick thought, but wanting Slovacek was anything but sick.

Disease was fuzzy brown rot that poisoned peaches when they were *just* ripe. Disease was the loss of love amidst a lonely generation. Disease was guilt, it was grief — disease was how they went hand in hand.

His desire was the beauty in finding polar opposites within another, wanting to make someone whole by piecing two together to make one. He didn't want to hurt Slovacek. He wanted to hold him in the days where everything felt just a little harder. He wanted to make him feel okay, make him feel like the world wasn't ending tomorrow and he didn't have to hurt others to stop it. He wanted to learn his language and whisper everything English couldn't conceptualise into his soft, freckled skin.

He watched as Slovacek's head turned ever so slightly. He watched as Slovacek noticed he was standing there. He watched the genuine, toothy smile etch itself onto Slovacek's face.

"Hey," Slovacek said.

"Hey," Isaiah echoed.

"Hi!" Eliana chirped, waving wildly with her small hand.

Isaiah walked over and shared a private smile with Slovacek.

Slovacek raised the monkey doll to show Isaiah. "Meet Dickhead."

Isaiah rolled his eyes.

Eliana giggled. "You can't say that!"

"I can. Now move over." He nudged his hip against hers and she scooted over. Isaiah wordlessly thanked him with a smile and sat down.

"Sorry I didn't help." Slovacek's apology sounded choked, like he was forcing the unfamiliar words out, but also like he was struggling to come to terms with his guilt.

"It's fine," Isaiah whispered back.

Slovacek handed Dickhead back to Eliana and she fidgeted with him for a while, running her hand through the dark-brown fur atop his head.

Isaiah wondered what Slovacek's hair would feel like if he dragged his hand through the loose, umber strands. Would it feel soft, like velvet bedding? His chest knotted, heart thumping like wild horses's hooves beating against the verdant grounds of tallgrass prairies.

His skin burned hot under his stuffy clothes where his thighs pressed up against Slovacek's. He thought, for a while, that having an epiphany about his — friend? — friend was not a good epiphany to have when there was someone else in the vicinity, because the need to grab hold of Slovacek's shoulders, shake sense into him, and tell him "Maybe I kept coming back here all this time was because the universe knew you'd show up," was running rampant in his chest.

Slovacek nudged his shoulder. "You called me Slovacek earlier."

Isaiah eyed him and tilted his head. "Yeah?"

"Nick's fine."

"You want me to call you Nick?"

"Yeah. My dad calls me Slovacek."

The way Slovacek – Nick – was offering his name felt intimate, like he was giving Isaiah something special, even if it was *just* his name. Isaiah nodded, his throat clenching tight, and glanced at Eliana.

Eliana was making Dickhead dance, waving his little arms around and tapping his feet against her knees. Isaiah leaned forward, balancing his elbows on the tops of his knees.

"Dickhead seems nice," he said, cringing at the words when Nick stifled his laughter behind his pressed lips.

"Hey! Stop calling her Dickhead!" She frowned, her eyebrows wrinkling in the middle as she squinted at him. She, weirdly, looked like Nick for a moment — all sweet, yet full of anger.

"Oh, I'm sorry." He side eyed Nick, who was shaking his head, his choppy hair swishing with the movement. Isiah's hand twitched with the need to brush through it, push it back from his face and watch each changing expression like watching the seasons pass — how each

little change accumulated into the sudden burst of a new season, how the red leaves slowly started trickling down until the pale snow suddenly started falling on bald branches. Like how if he were to look away for a second, everything would change in a flash.

He turned back to Eliana. “What’s his name?”

“*Her* name’s Mary Anne.”

“That’s a pretty name.”

“Nick said I should name her Kurva.”

Isaiah thought he knew that word — or he could’ve guessed what it meant from all the times he heard Alex yell it out after banging his head on the truck’s hood, or stubbing his toe against a corner, or touching a hot tray without oven mitts.

Isaiah contemplated hitting Nick and telling him off, until he glanced up and saw the way Nick was looking down at him. His eyelashes were fluttering with each gentle sway of the breeze, his eyes twinkling with shallow reflections of the stars. Isaiah swallowed thickly and shook his head at Eliana.

“Don’t say that word, okay?”

Eliana looked at him with an adorable, confused frown on her face.

“It’s not a nice word,” he clarified. “In fact, just stop listening to Nick.”

“But he says I’m good at Pokémon!” She argued.

“Even a broken clock is right twice a day.”

Her frown deepened. “I don’t know what that means.”

As Isaiah opened his mouth to explain, Nick interjected softly. “Why don’t you go ask your mom what it means?”

“Okay!” Eliana shrugged with all the nonchalance of a child who really did not care. She hopped off the bench and ran back inside.

When the door slammed shut behind her, Nick puffed out his cheeks and exhaled slowly. His head fell back against the siding, the long line of his throat bare to Isaiah.

“She’s sweet.”

“Yeah.”

They both went quiet. Isaiah watched the trees dance, shadowed in midnight darkness.

“Why did you want to join the marines?” Nick’s voice was small, broken. He sounded like he needed a distraction from his running mind, even if it was just Isaiah who could give it to him. “You mentioned something about it. Never explained why you wanted to join.”

Isaiah blew out a breath, the cooling air freezing it into a puff of faint smoke. “I want to be the president one day.”

Nick turned his head ever so slightly to eye him with his eyebrow raised. “*The* president.”

“*The* president.” Isaiah chuckled and shook his head. “It sounds dumb, I know, but imagine how cool it would be to have a black president. And imagine how cool it would be if that black president was *me*.”

A smile grew on Nick’s face and he sat back up. “Sure, go on.”

“Hey! I could do a better fucking job than whatever any of these guys have been trying to do for the past two-hundred years.”

“What would you do?”

“Well.” Isaiah then frowned. He hadn’t really gotten that far yet. “I’m not sure. I guess I was gonna start thinking about it when I joined the Marines and see what happened.”

“Why though? Seems like a lot more trouble than it’s worth.”

Isaiah just shrugged. “There’ve been so many black figures in history just tossed to the side because people didn’t feel they were *American* enough. Even if I had a serious campaign, everyone would look at me and see me as *other* instead of someone who wants to help them. I guess joining the Marines was me trying to prove I’m *American enough* for a campaign, get experience under my belt. Prove to people that I have a right to exist in this country, that I fought for them, for *their* freedom. And then no one can tell me I didn’t.”

“Sorry you have to do that.”

“It’s fine. It’s how the world works,” Isaiah said with all the indifference he could muster when all he really felt was irritation and anger. “What are you gonna do?”

“Well, can’t go to college, so that’s out.”

“You probably still could.”

“I didn’t graduate.”

Isaiah looked over at Nick. He looked painfully neutral, his mouth was a thin line and his usually furrowed eyebrows were relaxed. “Get your GED.”

“I don’t have money.”

“There’s grants.”

Then Nick turned to glare at him, irritation replacing neutrality. “And they don’t give enough. Not everyone has daddy or mommy’s money, alright? Lay off it,” Nick snapped.

“I’m sorry, I just—“

Nick huffed, “Whatever. Wasn’t expecting you to understand.” He stood from the bench and stomped off towards the door.

“Nick!” Isaiah called, watching as he swung the door open and slammed it shut behind him. The rattling mesh of the screen door filled the sudden silence that started crushing Isaiah. He sighed and rubbed his face with his hands.

Isaiah could do the pushing and pulling, he could take the fall when he knew he did something wrong, but he couldn’t keep guessing which mine had the trigger and would blow up in his face. Nick was so difficult, more intricate than any fucking puzzle he’d ever had to solve in his life, but some part of him wanted to keep going – tough it out to see Nick be completely and blissfully comfortable with him.

But on the other hand, Nick wasn’t some kind of passion project he could fix up. He was just some guy who was almost charged with assault and sent to prison for it. He was just some guy that could do the same to Isaiah for whatever reason. Like, what had the guy outside the bar done to set Nick off? Rib him, joke about him? Maybe Nick caught him in a compromising position and took his anger out on someone weak. Would Nick do the same if Isaiah were to be

vulnerable? If Isaiah were to get down on his knees and tell him what he felt without the fear he harbored getting in the way?

It was strange, and utterly scary, and he didn't know how to feel because he'd never felt this ever. He knew girls; he knew how they worked, how they responded to whatever Isaiah did, what made them angry and what made them happy. But he didn't know Nick at all. He couldn't read his body language, he couldn't read the cues, he couldn't say the right words to make him understand.

It was like they were speaking two completely different languages.

Maybe he needed to let go, let Nick deal with it on his own. He was a tough guy no doubt, Isaiah knew that *all* too fucking well. But it also hurt his ego to give up that easy, to just drop everything in a moment because, what, it got a little too complicated?

His mom taught him to stand up for himself, recognize when he didn't deserve wrongful treatment.

But his dad taught him that every battle wasn't won in power. It was won in time, and deciding if that time was worth the victory. Was Nick worth his time? That was the question, wasn't it? Was all the anger, all the dead conversations that once felt like they were leading somewhere, all the residual ache when Nick decided, in his anger, that Isaiah was wrong, worth it? Was Nick worth it?

Maybe his dad was right. Nick wasn't Isaiah's battle.

Isaiah needed to let go.

Chapter 2: Potůček Nektaru

Chapter Notes

> hi! this took a while to write as school has started up again, but id like to thank everyone for all the kudos and comments i got on the first chapter! i really appreciated hearing your kind words
>
> i hope you enjoy this chapter ! :D

Nick was ignoring Isaiah. Not in the bitchy, I-don't-want-to-talk-to-you-because-you-fucked-my-boyfriend kind of way teenage girls acted. Maybe it was like that, he wasn't actually sure. But he really just needed space, and time, and more space on top of that.

Nick had been with his uncle and aunt for only two weeks – or maybe three, he had stopped counting the days after a while – and he constantly felt the pressure of being around others; the family dinners, afternoons spent lounging on the couch, work in the orchard. He was never alone at any point besides the times he excused himself to the isolation of his bedroom.

Lily was always around. Nick didn't mind her, but sometimes she was too much; like, her presence was too big for a room and Nick couldn't fit alongside it. She was sweet, nice to him, but acted like Nick was a porcelain doll that would crack under any sort of pressure. She looked at him with those big, sad eyes that he couldn't even get mad at. And she *always* looked at him like that whenever she saw him. At some point, it was getting a little infuriating. The first week, he could handle it – he *was* kicked from his home, sure, but that didn't mean she had to keep the act up after two weeks.

Alex didn't really treat him like that, thankfully. He understood what Nick was going through, he thought. And, even if he didn't, Nick could talk to him about it – well, he hadn't, but he knew the offer to communicate was in the air and Nick could've taken it at any time. He didn't, though Nick was just glad he had someone he could share another language with. Sometimes his feelings were too big for English words and meanings would get stuck within the pages of the cycling dictionary in his mind. Words cluttered his head like a messy wardrobe, and some days he wanted to rip both languages out of his head so he could just *feel* instead of think.

But Alex didn't push him to talk about that kind of stuff. The silent

offer was still there whenever they hung out together in the barn, or in the living room, but Nick was just content to laze around and chat about meaningless shit, like music and food, in Czech. They didn't need to bring up the hard stuff, they didn't need to discuss their family issues. Life just *was*, and Alex got that.

Isaiah, maybe not so much.

Isaiah was different. So very different. He liked to talk about things, he liked to speak his mind when asked. Nick could ask a question and Isaiah would always have an answer, no matter what. And he didn't really know how Isaiah was able to do that.

Whenever Isaiah asked Nick something, even if it was just a simple question about his day, the words got gummed up in the cogs of his mind. His answer would get stuck on the tip of his tongue, taunting him from his tastebuds and laughing when he couldn't say anything besides "It's fine," or "Don't worry."

Sometimes he was scared he was losing his languages, but they were as clear as day at the forefront of his brain. He could hear them, feel them, darting around in his head like crazed hummingbirds caught in a cage. He just never was able to capture them wholly.

So, yeah, it was a little annoying whenever Isaiah expected him to be able to talk about his feelings and thoughts as easily as Isaiah could. No, Nick couldn't tell him what he thought about Alex's cooking. No, Nick couldn't describe the sky as beautifully as Isaiah could whenever he thought Nick wasn't listening. No, Nick couldn't explain to him how whenever Isaiah walked into a room, his heart thumped wildly in his chest and dared to rip free of the confines of his ribs.

Some things didn't need to be talked about, and Isaiah couldn't get any of the hints Nick was dropping.

Maybe he was a little harsh that night on the porch. He knew how to throw a punch, he knew how to spit at someone's boot, he knew how to insult a guy's mug. He was anything *but* a communicator, so when Isaiah kept expecting him to talk about feelings every single time they talked, he acted a little mean. *That* was how Nick communicated.

And Isaiah still didn't seem to take the hint.

The day after, Alex wanted them to be completely finished with the brown rot infected trees. Nick didn't mind the work – he did it with rare complaints – but he liked it especially when it was quiet.

The energy in the orchard from the day before had dissolved, broken down into whispers of indignation from either party. No longer was idle chatter passed back and forth between the two – a comfortable, effortless air drifting in the wind. Isaiah was doing his work dutifully, going through the trees like a practiced specialist, while Nick seemed to be having the worst fucking luck in his life. None of the trees he was tasked to scan had any brown rot, like they had magically healed and were no longer infected. But it seemed that Isaiah was doing *perfectly* fine, and the cardboard box was already one-thirds full just from Isaiah's work.

Nick felt the itch to give up, throw something at a wall, and lock himself in his room. He also felt that painful emptiness of not being needed.

Isaiah kept eyeing him, and Nick knew he'd start talking and there was a strange clock ticking down to when he'd have to push Isaiah away again. He didn't like doing it – sometimes it was just easier. Like when his dad got custody and Nick ran away the first night at his house to stay with a guy he knew. Like when that suit outside the bar tried to touch up on him and he maybe liked it a bit more than he should have, which got him sent to his uncle's in the first fucking place with split knuckles and a busted nose. Like when Isaiah didn't understand that Nick's life was in a rut, and probably would stay that way, and college wasn't going to fix it, especially without the funds he'd never obtain.

Isaiah sighed, the sound loud in the overbearing silence. "I'm sorry," he said.

Nick bristled, his body tensing like he was going to explode at any moment if he stood near Isaiah for a second longer. "It's fine," he grinded out. His gaze darted to a rotten peach hidden behind a thick bush of leaves. He grasped it, plucking it from the branch, and clenched it tightly in his fist. The scrapes on his knuckles had scabbed over, no longer raw like they were a couple days ago, but his fingers still hurt to bend.

The peach thudded as Nick underhanded it into the box.

"No, really," Isaiah said. Nick could see him, from the corner of his eye, turn his posture towards Nick. "I shouldn't have just assumed."

Nick looked up, turning to peer at Isaiah. His face looked drawn, like he was thinking too hard about this – about Nick.

“Said it was fine, didn’t I?”

“But it’s *not*, and you *know* it’s not.”

Maybe he should’ve thrown the peach at Isaiah’s head if it got him to stop talking, because he was getting closer to the line Nick explicitly drew in the sand. The boundary was there, wasn’t it? He thought it was.

Nick blew out a flash of air. “I told you it’s *fine*. You don’t have to apologize for every little fucking thing.”

He moved to the next tree down the line as Isaiah went quiet. There were a few rotten peaches in the tree, and he quickly plucked them, chucking them in the box with more strength than he should’ve put behind his throw.

“Man, I can’t do this bullshit,” Nick heard Isaiah grumble.

Nick glared at him. “What fucking bullshit?”

Isaiah threw his arms up and turned to Nick. “I don’t know – maybe having to tiptoe around you like you’re a fucking bomb timed to explode at any moment. I always gotta worry about whether or not you’re gonna blow up in my face.”

And there went Isaiah’s ego, his white knightage, straight out the window. Nick had been hoping to see it, see Isaiah unravel under Nick, but hearing it and feeling it first-hand hurt more than Nick was expecting. Isaiah’s words felt like a shotgun blast to the chest – it sounded like he was confessing how hard he actually was trying. He knew Isaiah cared about him, maybe because Alex asked him to, but Nick didn’t know the depth of that care. And he didn’t think Isaiah did either.

There was some part of him that wanted to accept Isaiah’s sympathy, his considerable effort to help Nick feel more at home, but there was also some other, louder part of him that wanted to get rid of Isaiah, push him away, tell him there was no use in putting his effort into him.

“You know what, college?” Isaiah visibly seethed at the nickname. “You don’t gotta worry about me all the time. Keep it to your fucking self.”

There was no space around him. There was no air in his lungs, no

thoughts in his brain. Just a pure, peaceful quiet as Nick stared back at the enraged look on Isaiah's face. So, he turned away and stormed off.

Alex was in the living room, reading the newspaper with his dumb reading glasses perched on the end of his nose. He looked as if someone's grandpa had been stolen and placed right on the couch, from his glasses to the ugly, thin sweater Lily's cousin had knitted for him.

He looked up as Nick stormed through the door, and when he was halfway up the stairs, he called out.

"Hey! You done?"

Nick ambled back down the stairs and shook his head.

The one thing about Alex was that he didn't mind when Nick didn't want to talk about personal stuff, but he could see it clearly when he was going through something, like Nick was an open book and his feelings were plastered right on his skin.

"What's up?" Alex asked.

He shrugged, and glanced down the hallway where Lily was pottering about in the kitchen.

"He's trying to look out for you, okay?" Alex switched to Czech, the meaning of his words more comforting, defining Isaiah's concern as more intimate than Nick saw it as.

He recoiled, and Alex frowned. "I'm not a defenseless baby," Nick said.

"That's not what it is, Nick. He cares about you," Alex said softly, leaning back into the couch and training his gaze on the newspaper. "Let someone do that for you for once. You'll find it's not so bad."

Easier said than done, Nick thought. To let Isaiah see his vulnerabilities, his insecurities, everything he'd shielded from everyone else, was something so intimate, so fucking terrifying.

He'd only let one person see that side of him; a chick he dated after he dropped out of high school. She was kind, sweet, and so hot, but she always seemed guarded whenever they talked. At the time, he had wanted to give her everything of his — his body, his mind, the truth

of his past —, so he told her everything about his life, his struggles. In turn, she said he was like a hedgehog; *"You're so, like… prickly on the outside, but on the inside, you're gentle. But you can't show anyone that, or you'd hurt them."* Nick had laughed and said she was being weird, but she looked back at him like he was stupid, or maybe like he didn't get it.

Letting Isaiah in like that wasn't simple. It was personal. It was like God putting the universe in man's palm and telling him to go wild — or something less egotistical where Nick wasn't comparing himself to God.

But, for some fucking reason, no one around him understood that.

And he didn't get why.

Isaiah's mom called the next day. Nick tried to not be bitter about it — he didn't even really want his mom calling — but he was struggling. He spent all morning in his room, ignoring Isaiah's quiet murmurs echoing up the stairs, until Lily called him for breakfast.

They ate in relative silence, and only when Lily and Alex left them alone with an offhanded comment about a family friend coming to stay over for a few days, did Isaiah speak.

"Do you wanna go to the river?"

It felt like a peace offering. The offer hung low in the air over the table, weighing down on Nick's half-eaten plate of peach jam on thin toast and his tense shoulders.

Nick shrugged. "Sure."

The river was far past the tree line beside the orchard, the rocky path to it was a straight line. On a good day, when the path was dry, the walk was a swift ten minutes. One side of the path looked out over the rolling field and a long fenceline dividing the land between the Slovaceks's and the McAffey's plot in the south-west. The fields teemed with weaving wild grass, shivering in the warm breeze. The other side was darkened with towering eastern hemlocks and lone batches of young white oaks. The forest ground below the tree canopies was covered in leaf litter, small, bushy shrubs, and patchy grass.

Isaiah was walking in front of Nick, a couple steps ahead, with two threadbare towels slung over his shoulder. He was wearing shorts, the fabric stretched tight across his lap, and an old shirt ripped at the collar.

Nick didn't have swimming shorts, so Isaiah gave him a pair. They were ugly and uncomfortable; a bright, sky blue with a tight waistband that was digging into his hips. He'd rather just go naked. He would've suggested skinny dipping instead if it weren't for the look Isaiah gave him before they left the house; his nostrils flared and his brows clenched into a furrow, telling Nick to not fuck this single thing up.

Once they reached the river, the trees thinned out and gave way to a clearing. The Conestoga bent in a winding S-shape, cutting the land into unequal halves. Silt from the river drove up onto the sandy riverbank that hardened into a rocky outcrop further up the bank. The grass by the sand was thinner there, though soft and cushiony underneath Nick's feet as he slipped his shoes off.

The water shimmered in the boring sunlight, golden rays echoing off the ripples of the calm river.

"I used to come here all the time." Nick heard Isaiah say as he tugged his shirt off, his words muffled between the thick fabric. When Nick got his shirt over his head, the bottom hem grasping onto the meat of his bicep, he looked over at Isaiah.

Isaiah looked… different. He couldn't pinpoint the expression, nor could he explain the quick rise and fall of Isaiah's chest, nor could he describe the warm flicker in his gut when he noticed Isaiah's cheeks darkening – he could barely see it had the leaves not shifted in the wind, sprinkling sunlight over Isaiah's face, and casting him in a brilliant, canary-yellow glow. His deep brown eyes had lightened, too, into an orange hazelnut shine encircling his dilating pupils.

Nick had to tear his gaze away, training it on the lazily flowing river. "It's nice down here," he murmured in response to Isaiah's earlier comment.

Isaiah just hummed a noncommittal noise. There was a dull thudding noise from Isaiah dropping the towels on the grass. Nick looked over, just as Isaiah was gripping the hem of his shirt and lifting it off his body. Slowly, Isaiah's skin below his shirt was revealed, inch by inch, dark skin spanning over his navel, his ribs, his speckled chest, the long

line of his throat. A bead of sweat dripped down his jaw, wiped away as Isaiah pulled his shirt up over his head before throwing it on top of the pile of towels.

Something hotter turned the flicker into a dry ember, a young wildfire aflame the forest in Nick's chest. He'd never felt anything like it – something akin to want when Nick had never wanted as much as he did in that moment. He didn't even know what he wanted: maybe he wanted Isaiah to talk as softly to him as the breeze grazed the tips of grass blades in eastern prairies; maybe Nick wanted to feel the warmth in Isaiah's cheeks under his palm; maybe something was wrong with him and he wanted so much more.

Without another glance in Nick's direction, Isaiah sauntered to the edge of the bank, just where the water waded against the soft grains. Nick stilled where he stood and watched Isaiah dip his feet in, before taking a few steps into the water. His shoulders hunched, the muscles of his back flexing with a ripple at the overwhelmingness of the – what Nick was guessing – chilly water.

When Isaiah was knee high in the river, he glanced over his shoulder, back at Nick. Their eyes caught and those embers of a quiet forest fire in his chest exploded into a flame. A sigh shuddered its way out of his throat and he swallowed around the growing lodge just behind his tongue.

"You coming in or what?" Isaiah called. Nick only caught sight of the smirk growing across Isaiah's face for just a moment before he started walking into the deeper water, where the crystal surface grew dimmer.

Nick made his way to the bank like Isaiah was a siren calling for him – his body echoing desire, yelling out into the bright, blue sky that Nick needed to be beside him, around him, close to him – and started to wade his way in. The water was fucking freezing and he shivered; mostly from the cool temperature, mostly from the way Isaiah leaned back and floated impassively on the top of the water as it lapping at his sides.

"Just don't swallow the water," Isaiah said. His eyes were shut against the sun's glare, his eyelashes blonde in the light.

"Why?"

Isaiah's eyes fluttered open and he turned his head to gaze at Nick. "There's bacteria in the water. If you get an infection, I'm not taking

you to the hospital."

"I wouldn't take you either," Nick grumbled, but Isaiah just smiled and shut his eyes.

Heeding Isaiah's warning, Nick pinched his nose and inhaled a gulpful of air before dunking underneath the surface. His eyes opened and strained to watch the sun rays filter through the water and the curve of Isaiah's back, the gentle sway of his strong thighs and arms keeping him steadily afloat.

He observed Isaiah until his lungs started to give and his arms began to ache. The water rushed around him as he pushed himself up and broke the surface of the river, gasping for sweet, precious air. He shook his head, his wet hair flicking droplets across Isaiah's body. If Isaiah had a protest, he didn't verbalize it.

Isaiah eyed Nick as he swam to the outcrop. He could feel the burn of Isaiah's gaze on the back of his neck as he passed by his outstretched legs. He pulled himself up over the edge of the outcrop, twisting around to sit and dangle his legs over the side. His heels kicked the muddy underside of the outcrop, toes just barely grazing the cold water's surface.

"Is the water good?" Nick said, trying to fill the silence with whatever.

Isaiah was still looking at him with a weird expression. He shrugged before letting his head fall back into the water, wetting his dark curls.

"You were just in here."

"Yeah, well…" He shrugged.

Isaiah snorted, before rolling over onto his stomach and swimming over to the outcrop. He looked up at Nick, his eyes glittering and eyelashes clumped together.

"It's fucking cold," Isaiah grumbled. Nick smiled. "Help me up."

His hand in Nick's felt cold, but the contact burnt hot as if he held an ice cold soda can for too long, tingling his palm with a blazing sensation. Isaiah pulled himself up with his other hand gripping the edge and his feet wedged into the jutting rocks. He climbed up next to Nick and sat beside him, a small, insignificant gap between their bodies.

Goosebumps spread over Nick's thighs where his skin wasn't already prickling.

Isaiah leaned back on his hands, head thrown back as the warm sunlight fell over them. Nick eyed the long line of Isaiah's throat, stubbly with new beard growth and reddening with a flush.

They sat there in the comfortable quiet for a few moments, basking in the sun's heat and the distant chirps of warblers.

"What's that tattoo?" Isaiah asked, eyes still shut against the blaring light.

Nick turned his gaze from Isaiah's face to his own arm. The scratchy lion stared back up at him, baring its teeth like a warning – warning Nick to say nothing, warning him that proximity was his biggest downfall.

He ignored it, and looked back up at Isaiah, who was already gazing at him; he seemed to do that a lot, and it stopped scaring Nick after a while. It was more comforting than anything, to be seen by someone because they *wanted* to see him, and not because he was something unusual to look at.

He'd gotten the tattoo when he was sixteen. Nick had always grown up in a home full of culture; he lived with his grandparents for the majority of his adolescence, until his mom divorced his dad and took Nick with her. But for that time, he felt loved within a culture that loved him back. It was a tough kind of love, surrounded by dark jokes and the feeling that things really didn't matter as much as people made them out to be. He learnt from that – it was how he existed in the western world with an indifference in the happenings and controversies people were easily offended by.

From that, he may have grown ignorant.

But it was what he knew, and it was what he felt loved by, even if others saw him as the rude figurehead of Red Slavs in his school.

That wasn't all he was, though. He was the Bohemian polka music his grandpa played when Aleš bought him a heligonka for Christmas Eve; he was the cinnamon and sugar crumbs of trdelník his grandma made for him while describing her days working in street food stands; he was the evenings where the light was dimmed to golden and his uncle and dad would dance to ORM's Discofil, momentarily putting their differences aside even just for a moment; in all, he was the soft vowels

and harsh consonants of the language his family taught him.

When his grandma died, he wanted a tattoo to honor her and everything she taught him. One of his vague memories of her was when she was bedridden in the late stages of her illness. Growing up, he'd always seen a metal plaque of a coat of arms in his grandpa's study; a double tailed, rearing lion with a star above its head, cast in bronze. He never knew what it was, never asked what it was. But when his grandma said something about teaching him everything he needed to know, he asked.

She had smiled at him and nodded shakily, before opening her chapped lips and speaking hoarsely in Czech.

"The Bohemian lion," she said, "came from the thirteenth century, representing the Kingdom of Bohemia. We have been occupied and defeated for hundreds of years, and yet that lion has stood as a symbol of our people for that entire time. It oversees our bravery in the face of peril." Her hand had overlapped his, taking it in her wobbly fingers. "That's why you're my little lion."

She'd uttered the words so carefully, so sweetly. *Můj lvíčku*. She'd said them like she knew they hurt to hear.

So, when he was sixteen, he got his friend to tattoo the lion on his left arm to honor his grandma and Bohemia. It was a little rough, sure, but when Nick saw it in the mirror, he felt content.

But he couldn't tell Isaiah all of that.

He glanced sideways at Isaiah and pressed his lips into a line.

Nick *wanted* to tell him, though. He wanted to tell Isaiah everything about him, from his fuck ups to what made him happy. From his life before his grandma's death to his life during his time in front of a forgiving judge. He wanted Isaiah to see him fully, maybe partially.

He just couldn't.

Maybe he was wrong for wanting things with Isaiah to be so confusing, so perplexing that he wouldn't blame Isaiah if he gave up on him. Maybe that was what it was; he wanted Isaiah to go away. But he also wanted him in his entirety, too.

He wanted to know what Isaiah's routine was like, how he woke up to how he went to sleep. He wanted to know how Isaiah functioned, how

his brain ticked, how his body worked. He wanted to know what Isaiah thought of him; was he the fuck up Alex asked to fix, or was he someone who didn't need fixing in actuality, and just needed someone to talk to?

Nick inhaled, and then slowly breathed out.

"It's a symbol of Bohemia," he said simply, before pushing himself to keep going. "My grandma taught me what it meant for her. Bravery, all that shit."

Isaiah caught his gaze as he nodded. There was a small quirk to the corner of his lips, smiling, but not making fun of him. There was something pleased in his gentle expression.

When Nick didn't say anything else, Isaiah spoke. "She taught you your culture?"

Nick nodded. "Yeah. Taught us how to cook, how to dance polka, how to speak Czech."

"You're gonna have to teach me polka," Isaiah said all serious like, and Nick laughed.

"Yeah, fuck that. You'll never see me dance, *especially* polka."

"Alright, challenge accepted."

Nick shook his head, observing every tiny expression on Isaiah's face until it felt like too much. He turned to look out at the river and the grassy bank on the other side.

"How about Czech?" Isaiah asked.

"What about it?"

Isaiah shrugged, and he nudged Nick's thigh with his knee. Nick didn't know if it was accidental, but when he looked back at Isaiah, his head was tilted and he looked keen.

"Teach me something."

Nick scoffed with a small smile. Isaiah was gazing at him with those eyes that made Nick give up way too easily, and he rolled his eyes. "Okay. What do you wanna know?"

Isaiah frowned as he thought. "I don't know," he said.

“Já nevím.”

Nick’s mouth wavered as he tried not to laugh at Isaiah’s incredulous look.

“I don’t know,” Isaiah said, straight faced.

“Já nevím.” Nick nodded as he burst out into a deep chuckle.

Isaiah rolled his eyes, and Nick’s smile faltered as he bumped his shoulder against Isaiah’s. He stilled against Isaiah’s warm skin for a moment before pulling back.

“It’s an important phrase, y’know.”

“Okay,” Isaiah said as he tensed. “Ja nevim?” He repeated, his consonant a bit clunky and his vowels too tight, but still otherwise fine. Nick nodded, and Isaiah exhaled in relief, laying back against the rock.

“I feel like an asshole whenever I try to learn another language.”

“Why?”

“I’m scared I’ll fuck it up. Maybe say the words wrong and get laughed at.”

Nick followed him down and laid beside him.

“If you wanted to learn, I could teach you.”

Isaiah turned his head to the side and gazed at Nick, his expression soft, unguarded. They were so close, the tips of their reddened noses just brushing.

“Nevím, proč mám chuť se ti otevřít,” Nick said.

Isaiah chuckled, looking back up at the sky, leaving Nick to stare at his side profile.

“Yeah, I can’t guess that one,” Isaiah said, shaking his head.

Before they went back to the house, Isaiah towelled himself off, and Nick patted down his damp shorts. The walk was quiet, but less tense. Nick could feel the weight lifted off his shoulders as Isaiah ambled beside him, instead of in front like earlier. The gravel beneath their

shoes crunched and shifted, the hemlock leaves fluttered in the breeze, and a young bald eagle circling over the field whistled. Everything felt natural, like the order of the world was right.

Isaiah caught his eye during the halfway of their walk and smiled something soft and gentle.

If Nick thought he was having a heart attack when he chased Isaiah down and wrestled him until he was below him, hard and wanting, then he was dying just at the sight of Isaiah's smile. There was an aching tug in his already sore chest, gnawing at the bones of his ribs like a rabid dog he didn't want to shoo off.

He smiled back.

Lily was inside when they got back. Nick was planning on sitting around in Isaiah's shorts, not bothered much to change into actual clothes, but she huffed at him and told him their friend was coming over, so he should've at least had some fundamental decorum.

He showered, at Isaiah's insistence too, and lazed around in his room until Lily knocked at his door.

"Hi, Nick," she said. "I'm sorry to do this, but my friend's staying over for *maybe* three nights. He needs your room."

"Okay." He shrugged. He could sleep on the couch, it wasn't the worst thing he'd slept on in his life.

Isaiah was passing by, running a towel over his wet curls from his exceedingly long shower, and stopped beside Lily. "He can take my room. I'll sleep on the couch."

She shook her head insistently. "No, you're practically family — I wouldn't do that to you. Nick said he's okay giving up his room."

That stung a little too deeply. If Lily saw Isaiah as *practically family*, what was Nick? Her husband's nephew she *had* to take care of because he *had* to have someone look after him? The fuck up with a criminal record she fed and housed like a dog kept in the backyard kennel?

As Nick stared at her, trying to hide his disbelief behind a thin veil of neutrality, she patted Isaiah's shoulder and walked off.

Isaiah looked a little startled, glancing back at Nick from the doorway. "I'm sure she didn't mean it like that," he said quietly.

Nick just shook his head. “It’s fine.”

But Isaiah then pouted his lips and tensed his shoulders, looking at Nick with those soft eyes like he was the most confusing thing in the world.

Maybe he was.

“Sometimes it’s not,” Isaiah said simply before walking away.

Lily’s friend, Jakub – Alex called him Kubo – hailed from the very north of Michigan, from a town on the shores of Lake Superior. A Slovak police officer visiting his distant relatives just before he moved to Seattle. He was passing through Pennsylvania on his way to Dover, Delaware, before his flight out of Washington D.C., Lily had told Nick – it was more than he needed to know. The pit stop, thankfully, was only going to last three nights, at the most, and he wasn’t going to be much of a nuisance from Lily’s shining praise.

Nick and the couch had to become friends in that time.

Dinner was boisterous, loud with the clinking of glasses and the excited chatter of respective Slovak and Czech over laden plates of strapačky with fatty slanina, and side bowls of garlic soup.

Nick caught slices of exuberant conversation between Alex and Kubo, a fleshy and messy mix of the sister languages. It was mainly about music – Kubo’s sister was still living in Czechoslovakia, working for a band called Lucie as a sound manager, and had sent Kubo hundreds of cassettes of underground music groups and soloists. Alex was trying to convince him to give him some with sly comments.

Though Isaiah and Lily looked lost, they just smiled whenever talked to in English or when Alex jumped up at something Kubo referenced.

Nick was quiet for the most part.

Dinner was going to continue far past midnight, even after the dishes were cleaned and put away, and Lily was heading to bed. Nick was about to turn in just after Isaiah excused himself to shower when Kubo started talking to him.

He didn’t really understand all the words Kubo spoke – obviously, there was a lot of overlap between their languages, but there were big gaps he couldn’t fill from his lacking level of fluency. Slovak was more

gentle than Czech, more forgiving. He wasn't used to it.

Nick glanced at Alex, who, with an understanding smile, translated what Kubo said.

"He asked to see your tattoo. I told Kubo about it when your dad told me you got it. He said it's interesting."

Nick hesitantly lifted his shirt sleeve.

"Ah! A lion," Kubo said, swaying closer over the table to peer at the ink. "Bohemian?"

He nodded and Kubo leant back in his chair.

"It looks good. A bit shaky," he said.

The words still sounded foreign to Nick's ears as his brain whirred to translate them. He pulled down his shirt sleeve and gave Kubo a small smile.

"He vie Czech, nie?" Kubo asked Alex.

Nick glanced at Alex, who nodded, and said, "My mom taught him."

"I got the tattoo for her," Nick said.

"Ah, he does!" Kubo chuckled, before he looked at Nick with a soft gaze. "What a wonderful way to honor her."

"Thank you."

"There's nothing to be thankful for," Kubo responded with a welcoming smile.

Nick pressed his lips into a thin line and quickly said goodnight. He took a swift shower, changing into his usual boxers and a thin tee.

The couch in the living room was set up for him with a thin sheet over the cushions and a quilt folded up on the back of the couch. He had dragged his pillow down earlier and set it up against the arm. Looking at the set up, and at the sound of the creaky springs as he laid down, he knew he wouldn't have a restful sleep. Despite the age and the expectancy that the cushions would be somewhat mushy with ancient foam, the couch was as hard as a rock. Something was digging in his back – Nick feared to learn what it was, so he silently dealt with it.

Alex and Kubo thankfully hushed, though the light of the kitchen streamed brightly down the hallway, pouring past the living room archway.

He wondered how comfortable Isaiah was. Was he sleeping all snug in his bed, curled up around his blankets without a care of how comfortable Nick was? Was he also wide awake wondering where he went wrong and where he went right in their interactions? Was he wondering what everything meant to him, if there was something to even mean?

“I don’t know why I feel like opening up to you,” he whispered the Czech words into the warm night air, clutching the folded quilt’s edge and dragging it over his body. “I don’t know *why* I feel like opening up to you,” he echoed, like saying it over and over again would tell him what his own words meant. “I don’t know why I feel like opening up to *you*.”

A dull thud in the kitchen alarmed him, but it was followed with a loud, hoarse yawn, the flick of the light turning off, and the padding footsteps of Alex and Kubo heading upstairs.

“Goodnight, Nick,” he heard Alex say as he passed by.

Nick thought he hummed the words back in his overwhelming tiredness, but it felt like he made the noise in his head. Sleep enveloped him moments after that, wrapping him up in a loving, motherly embrace.

He spent the next day with an aching crook in his back.

Lily wanted the trees watered, even despite Nick’s complaint. Kindly, Isaiah offered to walk around, watering the trees, if Nick just sat by the tap and made sure the decrepit hose didn’t pop off the spout where it was duct taped.

Outside, the sun was bright as all hell, and burnt worse. The heat was *just* pleasant, but way over the threshold of bearable. Sweat dribbled down Nick’s back and collected at the waistband of his too-hot jeans.

Isaiah was wearing a thin wife beater and well-fitted jeans – when he had first seen him, Nick had to swallow the collecting saliva in his mouth – which was probably smarter to wear than the black tee Nick had on.

The lawn chair was comfortable enough, and he was partially entertained by the vague chatter of Kubo and Alex as they spoke over a bumpy, Slovak song on the other side of the barn wall.

Nick's eyes followed Isaiah's calculated path through the rows. He'd go up an entire row, walk all the way back down, and continue up the next over, making sure the hose didn't kink at any time, or wrap around the trunk of a tree.

When he had finished with the sixth row, Isaiah trudged back towards the barn with a tired groan.

"Fuck, man. It's way too hot for this shit," Isaiah muttered, looking like he was five seconds away from ripping the wife beater off his back and wiping himself down with it, his dark skin shimmering with a glittery sheen of sweat. His hands were dripping with water from the nozzle spray – Nick wanted to reach out and suck the water off his fingers. He didn't think Isaiah would object.

"Can we go back inside?" Nick sighed, the back of his head thudding against the wall behind him, gripping the plastic lawn chair arms and spreading his thighs apart as his lap started to overheat.

"You're not the one watering the trees, asshole. You owe me."

"I got a bad back. The couch fucked me up last night."

Isaiah's face shifted into something Nick called his shit-filled-thinking face, plump lips flattened and brows furrowed into his squinted eyes. He blew out a tense breath of air and fiddled with the nozzle of the hose, plugging the end with his thumb.

"Why don't you just sleep in my bed?" Isaiah offered, quickly glancing up at Nick.

Nick just caught the look in his eyes – leaden, wishful.

"The couch sucks, college. You're not gonna sleep on it," Nick said.

"We'll share it."

"The couch?" Nick pressed his lips together to stop his shit-eating grin from spreading across his face.

"No, shithead," Isaiah groaned. "My bed."

Nick shrugged all nonchalant-like. "If you wanted to take me to bed,

you could've just asked. No need for bullshit nuances."

The faint, red flush daubing across Isaiah's frowning face was a reward within itself. Nick smiled, huffing a chuckling breath as he watched Isaiah try to act somewhat calm while the tips of his ears blushed.

"Big word, Slovacek. I was being nice."

"You're always nice."

Isaiah glared at him. "So? What's it gonna be?"

"Okay," Nick said with a single nod, and nothing else. "I'll sleep with you in your bed."

Isaiah just shook his head with a low, rough groan, and turned on his heel to walk down the next row of peach trees. Nick's gaze grazed over Isaiah's sweat drenched back; watching the way the material clung to each kinetic muscle like a second skin; counting each wet curl that stuck to the nape of his neck.

"Too nice," Nick sighed, settling further into the chair as he widened his legs further. "*Too* fucking *nice*."

There was a fair happening in town; the all-American kind with the violent spinning rides, greasy food from food trucks that never passed their yearly health checks, and the sickly scent of sweetness in the air that could make a grown man vomit. Nick didn't like the idea, he'd have rather slammed his head into a brick wall over, and over, until his brains were scrambled, but Kubo wanted to go.

So, they were in the car driving into town.

Isaiah was squished in between Nick and Lily, and Nick felt Isaiah's thigh incrementally pressing harder against his, body somewhat turned to Nick as he tried to give Lily space. They were closer than ever before – the only thing closer would've been Isaiah on his lap – and the heat radiating off their bodies was almost hotter than the sun's surface.

Nick repositioned slightly in his seat as Isaiah's pressing thigh kept pulling the fabric of his jeans, tightening the denim around his legs, and his lap felt uncomfortably stiff. He clasped his hands in between his thighs and honed in on Alex and Kubo's dull conversation;

something about American culture he couldn't really understand with Kubo's fusing words.

He wasn't focusing entirely on Kubo's question directed at Nick until Kubo turned in his seat to glance back at him.

"Prosim?" Nick said, lifting his head.

He felt Isaiah's leg shift against his.

"He was asking if you've ever been to Europe," Alex said in Czech.

"Oh. No, I haven't," Nick responded simply.

"Too bad." Kubo shrugged and turned back in his seat.

Nick went back to looking at his hands, trying to ignore the pressure of Isaiah's taut, warm body against his.

Lost in his thoughts, he heard Alex distantly say, "No, he speaks English."

"He's close with Niky?"

"I hope so," Alex responded with a minute tilt of his head. "They're comfortable together – good friends."

Kubo hummed, looking out the passenger door window at the rolling fields. Nick followed his gaze — Isaiah's profile was no longer in his hazy peripheral vision.

The Pennsylvanian greenery rushed past them in groupings: dense forests of tall, lush hemlocks and thick bushes covering the grassy ground; open, rolling fields of green, late June corn dotted with white farm buildings in the distance.

He wondered if Europe looked the same as America. He'd only ever seen photographs of Czechoslovakia from when his grandparents showed him photos, but the land always seemed cold and war torn, the effects of an Axis invasion and World War Two developed into the black and white photos of tanks in town streets and the saddened eyes of his grandpa, twenty-six and a soldier with a holly wreath in his pale hands.

Nick didn't want to go to Czechoslovakia. Alex always talked about it like it was still stuck in the 50s, but with the fall of Communism, he started telling Nick he'd hoped it was changing for the better – that

maybe one day he could visit their distant family (great uncles, aunts, second removed cousins, apprehensively lost in the aftermath of a military operation when his grandpa and grandma fled to America), and if he did, he'd take Nick.

He feared that if he went and saw the vast extent of his culture, he'd realize he wasn't *Czech enough*. Nick felt Americanized in his ways – a New Jersey rat who spoke another language and ate different food from most, but overall, more American than European. He feared he'd feel like a fraud, a bitch dog in sheep's clothing. He feared his accent was fucked up, that no one would understand him.

He feared his far distant family wouldn't see him as equal – the blue-blooded coward who knew three-fourths a language, half a culture, and a fifth of a family.

Nick and Isaiah grouped together, split from the three adults, and did the usual fair bullshit, like the crazy rides with flashing lights – Isaiah had to beg Nick off that one UFO looking ride that spun kids full of carbs until they vomited, but eventually caved when Nick waved a five dollar bill under his nose with a promise of sugar-filled slushies — and expensive games that Nick knew were tryna cheap him out of a shitty, plush shark.

At some point, when the sun started setting in a bright burst of yellow, Isaiah herded Nick onto the ferris wheel. They sat, facing each other, and talked the entire time, about nothing and everything.

"What's your favorite movie?" Isaiah asked when they were slowly nearing the top.

Nick looked from the window to Isaiah, his heart beating five times as fast. He didn't even know why – it was just a question about movies, but something in Isaiah's tone made it feel deeper than just that. Isaiah wanted to know about *him*. Not just where he was from, his language, what his unforeseen future was going to look like – but what he enjoyed, what he did in his spare time, what he was like as a person.

Isaiah saw under the thick layer Nick grew from what he thought made him different, from the things he thought made people turn their heads and sneer at him.

"Rocky, maybe."

“Good choice,” Isaiah said, stretching his legs out in front of him. He tapped his ankles against Nick’s, and Nick leaned into Isaiah’s touch.

“You watched it?”

“My dad liked it.” Isaiah turned to look out the window. “My mom didn’t. Said it was too violent, but I think she was always happy Apollo won.”

“Rocky wins in the second movie,” Nick reminded him, snarkily, with a small grin on his face.

Isaiah glared at him.

“And then he trains Rocky in the third, *after* Rocky’s loss.”

They argued about the Rocky movies, without ever mentioning the fourth, until the cabin shuddered to a stop at the top of the ferris wheel. In the distance, over the green fields and thin forests and spine of the shallow mountains, the sun slowly inched downwards to its slumber, painting the sky in an aureate show.

“It’s beautiful,” Isaiah said, awed at the light.

Nick glanced at Isaiah, his brown skin was golden, like he was turned into a statue before Nick’s very eyes. His soft eyelashes fluttered against the last blinding light before dimming the sky.

He thought of how Isaiah would react if Nick just leaned forward and pressed his lips against his warm, golden cheek. Would he push him away with all the anger a gentle man could contain? Would he look at Nick with disappointment, fear, or nausea?

Would he be content with the fact that Nick wanted him?

The ferris wheel lurched and they were on their way back down, casting Isaiah’s face in shadow as their cabin fell below the tops of the trees.

The lights of the fair seemed brighter now under the haze of a dull, blue twilight, the screams of kids on fast rides quieter as the music got louder.

“Fuck, I’m tired,” Isaiah sighed.

Nick suggested getting food and sitting down somewhere to wait out the other three’s energy. Isaiah shrugged and agreed, and bought Nick

three funnel cakes and a hot dog for himself. Though the funnel cakes weren't as good as the ones he had at the farmers market, he still scarfed them down and chugged a Caprisun once they found a bench that wasn't covered in a mysterious, sticky liquid.

The crowd ebbed and flowed before them; families with overexcited kids, couples holding big stuffed animals in their arms, groups of girls giggling and glancing around at boys as they passed. Nick watched the people float by, every single one of them oblivious to the war raging in his chest whenever Isaiah's knee knocked against Nick's as he swayed his legs to a techno beat coming from a twister ride.

"Can you understand Jakub?" Isaiah asked. When Nick looked over at him, there was a strange flush on his cheeks. "Like, he speaks Slovak and you speak Czech. But you can still understand him?"

Nick shrugged. "We're one country, and we're two different cultural identities, so the languages are kinda the same. Some words we don't share, and the grammar's different. But a lot of our shows and music are either language, so you kind of pick it up. Jakub has an accent though, so I don't understand as well."

"And if you don't know a word?"

"I just guess."

Isaiah was watching Nick closely, his knee pressed against the side of Nick's thigh. There was still that unusual blush on his face, now stretching to his neck.

"What words?"

"Uhh, there's a lot."

Isaiah just looked at him with those eyes that bordered on pleading until Nick huffed, glanced around, and thought of a word to appease Isaiah's puppy face.

"Ledňáček," Nick said. "It means kingfisher, but, uh, I think it's pohárik— or, no, rybárik. And then some words are kind of the same, but mean different things, like párek and párik."

Nick was expecting Isaiah to laugh, to joke about his pronunciation and nitpick him, but he was just sitting quietly like a well behaved student in class.

He felt a little selfish — he never asked Isaiah about his culture. In fact, he knew absolutely nothing about African American culture, and he never even bothered to ask when Isaiah was so invested in his. Would it have been rude just to ask now?

“What about you?” Nick hesitantly asked.

“I don’t speak another language,” Isaiah joked.

“No, I mean, like, your culture. You always ask me about mine. I know nothing about yours.”

Nick looked over at Isaiah. In the blue twilight, his face looked like marble. He looked beautiful. And the smile that widened on his face was even more entrancing than anything Nick had ever seen in his life.

“Well, my mom’s family is Gullah Geechee from the North Carolina coast. My great-great grandma moved to Baltimore, so we kind of lost the connection to that — and the language too —, but she kept the food and music tradition alive. My mom makes mean shrimp and grits.”

“You can’t speak the language?”

“No.” Isaiah frowned, peering down at his intertwined fingers in his lap. “I know it’s a creole. My grandpa spoke it but my mom never picked up on it. I kind of understand why.”

Another group of girls passed, though they looked older — twenty, or so. They were pretty, long hair clipped up, short skirts that went halfway down their thin thighs. One stuttered to a stop and glanced at Nick just before approaching Isaiah.

“Hi,” she said, her voice sweet like pie.

Isaiah looked up at her with a customary smile. “Hey.”

“Um, sorry, this is probably weird, but do you wanna, like, hang out with us?”

Nick shuffled his feet against the grassy ground and shifted in his seat, moving an inch or two away from Isaiah, though Isaiah’s knee never stopped pressing into Nick’s leg. A warmth settled within him, but he quietly exhaled it out as Isaiah momentarily glanced over at Nick.

“Uhh…”

“We’ll make it worth your time.” Nick thought he saw her wink, or maybe he was just crazy.

“Sorry, I’m with my friend,” Isaiah said with a wince. “Have a good night though.”

“You sure?”

“Yeah. I’m pretty sure.”

“Alright, well, later then,” the girl said with a smile and a wave as she caught up with her friends who’d wandered off.

Isaiah blew out a breath, rubbing his palms up and down his jean cladded thighs.

“Why didn’t you go?” Nick asked.

“You would’ve?”

“In a fucking heartbeat.”

The corner of Nick’s mouth twitched into a smirk as Isaiah scoffed in utter disbelief, shaking his head.

“Yeah, well, I’d rather hang out with you than some fucking girl who wants to get in my pants.”

“Who said *I’m* not tryna get in your pants?” Nick joked, but something in his mind told him he was so, completely fucking serious. Having Isaiah next to him, near him, felt like a burning ember that was about to burst into a spectacular, embarrassing explosion if he didn’t quell himself.

Isaiah glared at Nick with a harsh side eye that looked more like a warning than anything else.

“Watch it, Slovacek,” Isaiah muttered.

“Yeah? *Make me*.”

Nick expected Isaiah to do something: to snap at him and tell him to shut his mouth; stomp off and get lost within the crowd and his irritation. But Isaiah just sat there, pointed eyes trained on Nick’s face, gaze wavering as they darted across his features — his eyes, his nose,

his furrowing brows, his cheeks, his lips. And, then, he turned his head away and looked back out at the crowd as if nothing had happened, as if his gentle gaze hadn't kickstarted Nick into a premature heart attack; his heartbeat thumping wildly in his chest.

Huh.

Miraculously, Nick and Isaiah spotted Alex, Lily, and Kubo, pottering about with big cups of soda and the wavering teenage excitement The grins on their faces were contagious, and their laughter bubbly.

Kubo had spotted them first, raising his arm and waving over the heads of tired families.

"There's the lion and his lioness," Kubo yelled out in slurred Slovak. Alex stifled a laugh as Lily pushed Kubo's shoulder, muttering about him not speaking English like promised.

Nick glared at Kubo, but the guy looked absolutely smashed, lids drooping and a big, sloppy grin plastered on his face.

"Where'd you find alcohol?" Nick asked Lily, who seemed the most sober out of the three.

"There was a beer garden," she said truthfully, with a regretful frown. "No cap on purchases."

"And you let them get drunk?" Nick said, gaze darting between the tired-looking Alex and giggly Kubo. Beer wouldn't have gotten them like that. Especially not Alex who grew up drinking beer like water. Nick knew his family only *really* got drunk on brandy. How they found brandy in a beer garden was really the question.

"I didn't *let* them get drunk, Nick," she grumbled with a glare. "They're grown men. They make their *own* decisions."

"Okay, okay. I need to get home." Alex placed a hand on Lily's tensed shoulder, rubbing small circles into her skin. "Can you drive, Isaiah?" He asked, already starting to shuffle Lily towards the emptying parking lot.

"I'm sure I can try," Isaiah said.

They made it back after some struggle. Nick called shotgun as Isaiah was driving, much to Lily's dismay of having to sit next to two men

spilling out the sides like a tall beer glass. Kubo could barely sit up straight, leaning heavily against both Lily and Alex somehow, and still was able to belt a Slovak folk song Nick could just barely eke a rough translation out of.

“Fly falcon, white bird, to my beloved. Greet him a hundred times, say softly to him…” Kubo cried out in the confines of the quiet car.

Nick was swift to ignore him as he fiddled with the radio until a loud rock station came on.

When they got back to the house, everyone trooped off to their respective places. Alex and Lily tiredly marched up the stairs to their room, Kubo raided the kitchen for dumplings then went up to Nick’s room, and Isaiah disappeared into the bathroom, the shower sputtering to life.

Nick heard the water fall from the hallway as he passed by with his own towel and clothes to change into. He hesitated to a stop, until he slumped and leaned against the door, all the tiredness of the day flooding his body at once. The water splashed and pittered, the sound soothing him like a lullaby and a gentle hand carding through his hair.

Only when he heard the shower stop, did he stand up and stand back against the opposite wall. Isaiah took a few precious minutes in the bathroom before the door cracked open, a wall of steam blowing out into the hallway.

Isaiah emerged through the steam, a towel wrapped around his waist and otherwise completely naked. Nick was breathless, eyes tracing planes of pure muscle and the glistening spray of water, droplets trickling down his skin.

Nick’s gaze darted up and settled on Isaiah’s reddening face.

Isaiah shuffled his feet awkwardly, adjusting his grip on the top edge of his towel.

“You need the bathroom?”

“…Yeah.”

“Oh. Okay.”

He started walking towards his room, and Nick was just about to enter

the bathroom, before he turned around.

“You’re gonna sleep in my room?”

“Maybe,” Nick said with a small smirk.

“Christ.”

“Ask nicely and I might.”

“Fuck off, Slovacek.”

Nick shrugged. “Your loss, Apollo.”

Isaiah just shook his head at him as Nick entered the bathroom and took a quick, freezing cold shower to soothe his aching back and his rigid dick — he didn’t even bother jerking off. He was so tired, and a shampoo bottle wasn’t the best material to think of. There *was* the show Isaiah gave him, water droplets trailing down his pecs, pooling in his navel, taunting Nick as they slid further into the fibres of Isaiah’s towel. The sweat dripping down Isaiah’s neck in the orchard as he clenched his fist around the dribbling hose, his damp shirt clinging tight to his back. His body in the river as he floated, peaceful and calm, strong legs and arms holding him afloat, and then his smooth hand in Nick’s as he leveraged himself up the outcrop.

The freezing water wasn’t helping.

The thought of embarrassing himself, getting into Isaiah’s bed hard and wanting, and being ridiculed, had made his dick falter somewhat in its desire. He quickly got out of the shower and dressed.

Isaiah’s room was so stiflingly quiet, Nick could hear himself breathe. He could see the vague outline of Isaiah’s body under the quilt as blue moonlight streaked across the room. Nick pulled back the covers, and, with his heart racing like he’d done three consecutive lines and five tequila shots, he laid down. There was no fanfare and celebration, there was no SWAT team to come and take him down, and there was no explosion as the world ended. It simply just was.

The bed was comfortable, soft, and he dragged the little sliver of the quilt Isaiah lent him over his body. It wasn’t entirely needed — his body was running as hot as the sun, his skin flushed like a rash. He could feel Isaiah’s presence beside him; each shift of the sheet under his legs, every soft sound he emitted at any minute movement, the stable breath and rhythmic rise and fall of his chest as he slept

shallowly.

Nick observed Nick's face – the slope of his nose, the thick hair of his eyebrows cast in the blue light, his lips parted as he breathed steadily –, until his breath evened out and he swiftly fell asleep.

Nick had never woken up as refreshed as now. His back no longer radiated a warm ache, pulsing under his tender muscles. Instead, his limbs felt like puddles after gentle rain under the covers, and his upper back felt weak with hot comfort. The smell of summer leaves in the breeze, dusty book pages that held the knowledge of two universes, and the underlying chemical smell of apricot scented aftershave and face cream. Despite the heat in the room, and the consequent pricking sweat at the back of his nape, he felt entirely comfortable.

There was weight behind him, pressed up against the back of his thighs and something solid rested on the bone of his hip, curled around the crease in between his hip and thigh. Nick shifted, and so did the weight behind him with a short, low hum. Quietly, he cracked open an eye and peered behind him. The early morning light was bright, streaming into the room from the thin curtains. Isaiah's face and his half naked body was lit up by the sunlight, pale gold skin shining against the shadows of the dim room. His palm was warm on Nick's hip, thumb pressing into the hard bone there.

For some reason, it felt right, like his palm was moulded to Nick's hip. If the world were to end right there and they'd decompose into the bones of young skeletons, scientists wouldn't be able to separate Isaiah's everlasting warm hand from Nick's body.

Their ankles were intertwined, freezing cold skin against warm, as Isaiah's knee pressed into the back of Nick's.

Isaiah moved, tilting his body further into the mattress, further against Nick's. The weight pushing up against the back of Nick's thighs pressed closer, he could almost feel the scorching shape of Isaiah's lap. It felt like it was marking him, branding his ownership like livestock. Nick froze at Isaiah's next slight movement, a languid thrust, his dick pressing harder against his skin despite the two layers between them.

Nick didn't know whether to quietly slip out of the bed and downstairs, back to the aching safety of the unforgiving couch, or wake Isaiah up and risk embarrassing the guy, or just lay there like nothing was happening and Nick wasn't affected by it.

But he *was* affected by it; his own fucking dick was getting hard like some dumb creature separate from his body that made its own decisions, like, for example, get hard when another guy's dick was pressing up against his ass.

Nick chose the first option, to get up and leave, just so neither he nor Isaiah got embarrassed by their evasive bodily functions. Isaiah's hand fell limply against the bed as Nick slid out from under the covers and swung his legs over the side of the bed. Isaiah whined softly against his pillow, and he smushed his cheek into the pilly, gingham fabric.

Nick watched Isaiah's face for a few moments, observing each huff of breath and each tick of his eyebrows. He looked momentarily peaceful under the light of the warm sunrise, his face completely relaxed in gentle slumber. Nick held his hand out in front of Isaiah's face, fingers barely touching his skin, hovering over his cheekbones and the tip of his nose.

Isaiah sighed, the air blew out of his nose and grazed over Nick's fingers — a tender kiss, like the breeze ruffling Nick's hair in autumn as cars whizzed by him; like his grandma's sweet words as she lulled him to sleep when his mom couldn't.

Stopping himself from laying back down under the covers and falling back asleep until midday beside Isaiah, Nick stood up and went downstairs.

There were still some leftover dumplings and he made a quick meal of that, before finding clothes to change into. He grabbed a shirt from a few days ago that he forgot to give to Lily to wash, and pulled his sleep shirt off to put the other one on. It was a band shirt Alex gave him years ago when he grew out of them; some Russian rock group Nick couldn't pronounce who were popular in the 70s. He thought of putting his jeans on but the air in the house was stiff and hot, Nick could barely breath in. He guessed the air outside would be much less forgiving, and, after some deliberation, put Isaiah's shorts on. They were still incredibly tight at the waistband, and wearing them over his boxers wasn't exactly helping, but he couldn't go outside in jeans.

He might've as well gone down to the river.

Taking his boxers off, changing back into the shorts, grabbing a towel, and two bottles of Alex's cheap beer, he started walking down to the river. He was right; as he exited the house, hot air blasted him and started prickling at his skin like little embers of a roaring flame. But

there was a gentle breeze in the air, carding airy fingers through his dark strands and grazing his face with joyful wind. He sighed against it, turning his face to the sun and squeezing his eyes tight against the harsh glare of early sunlight.

He passed by the orchard, the peaches were ripening into their red namesake and he was sure they'd start harvesting them in a week. He reached a hand out and plucked one from the leafy branches, rolling the fuzzy fruit around in his hand before taking a bite out of its soft flesh. It was tangy, much too sweet, and a little bitter as his teeth grazed the pit.

The trees forest beside him thickened as he passed by the barn and the field that stretched out behind it. He threw the pit into the grass. The walk after that was a few minutes long until he happened by the thin, rocky path that led to the river.

Light shimmered across the river as the sun broke through the lower canopy, the ripples rimmed in bright, pale yellow light. Nick pulled off his shirt, and dropped the towel and the beers in the grass, before approaching the river and slowly wading in. Freezing cold water lapped at his skin, licking up his legs to the tops of his thighs as he hiked in further. He inhaled sharply, pinched his nose and screwed his eyes shut before dunking his entire body in when the water got waist deep. He blinked his eyes open and swam against the weak current, pushing his arms through the water and kicking his legs in the comparatively harsh movement.

He imagined Isaiah's body floating atop the water, shaking his head at Nick and smiling something soft as Nick broke the surface and shook the water off his face. He imagined Isaiah's face, his softened gaze observing Nick like he was the most special thing on Earth. He imagined Isaiah's voice, gravelly and confident, as he asked Nick questions he never had even thought about. That was his favorite thing about Isaiah — he was able to make Nick think. Not even just shallow conversation that he could have with the local crackhead at a 7/11, but something so meaningful and absolute that Nick had to actually stop and think about his answer.

He splashed around for a bit longer, letting the sun bite a weak burn onto his skin, before trudging out of the river and laying down on the grass. Above him, the sky was a bright blue, clouded only by cottony wisps that snuck off behind the leaves bordering his vision.

The lapping of the water against the river rocks and the leaves

brushing in the wind filled the tight silence. The grass below his body felt soft, cold and wet from early morning dew. He felt comfortably contained in the weighted air, pressing in against his relaxed body.

Flashes of the morning came to him: the cosy blanket covering his lower body, kicked around his and Isaiah's feet; the sunlight streaming through the thin, embroidered curtains and onto his skin, warming wherever it touched; the weight of Isaiah's hand on his hip; Isaiah's rigid dick pressing insistently against his thigh, and the soft thrusts against his skin that were driving him fucking wild just thinking about them.

Nick sighed, his head falling back further into the grass, tickling the hair on the base of his skull. He couldn't get it – Isaiah, the physicality, the want – out of his fucking mind. It felt sickly, sticking to each nerve in his brain and tugging whenever he tried to stop thinking about him. But his own body betrayed himself like he betrayed it over and over again.

"Shit," he murmured, glancing down at the tent in his shorts. He wasn't even half-hard yet, but his body felt like it was halfway through sex. The ghosts of kisses and touches caressing his clothed skin, the gasps of stifled moans and the ticks of his taut muscles as he grasped himself through his shorts.

His palm, the friction of the fabric against his dick felt almost perfect – but not enough. Would it have been fine to jerk off here? He glanced around — the closest person would've been a couple hundred feet away —, he was completely alone. He pulled the tight waistband down, under his balls, a pleasant, firm feeling spreading across his body.

He grasped himself with a dry hand, eyes shuttering closed on the tightened updrag and loosened downward twist.

What would've Isaiah felt like around his dick? His mouth, warm and wet and welcoming, tongue dragging up and down the underside, and flickering incessantly over the slit of his tip. His shiny, brown eyes peering up at Nick as his cheeks hollowed in, sucking him down deep and easy.

A wild groan escaped his throat, choking out against his tongue, and he grinded his teeth together. Lips pursed, brow furrowed, eyes fluttering shut, head tipping back further, and further.

Nick fucked girls. He *liked* to fuck girls. He liked the warmth of their

mouths, the warmth of their cunts, their unbidden, high moans when Nick played with them. Their boobs, their curves, their soft skin.

But he'd never been with a guy. He never really thought about it. Shoving his dick inside an ass didn't sound appealing – it was gross, maybe a little sinful if he really cared about that. A mouth, a hand, he'd take. He'd never reciprocate, fuck that. It felt too weak, too gay — too meaningful, like he was giving up his trust and placing it in the hands of someone he knew could hurt him.

And despite that, the thought of fucking Isaiah in the moment felt senselessly desirable. The thought of Isaiah touching him, his slick tongue in Nick's mouth — Nick's hand on Isaiah's dick, his mouth replacing his hand.

He gripped himself at the base with an unbidden moan. He felt too tight, too loose at the same time, too comfortable and uncomfortable. It felt right and it felt so, *so* fucking wrong.

If Isaiah saw him like that – his hand around his cock; thinking about Isaiah's hand, his mouth on his skin; moaning like some crazed, horny teenager – he'd never talk to Nick ever again.

And maybe Nick wanted that. Maybe he wanted Isaiah to see him so clearly and vulnerably he'd recognize the pain in Nick — how it couldn't be saved, or fixed like he knew Isaiah wanted.

He dragged his hand upward, then back down, then up again once more. It was too much, then it wasn't enough. He encircled his other hand around his dick, atop the one already there, planting his feet in the grass, digging his toes into the soft, wet blades. He thrusted up into his dry fists, a deep groan fighting against his closed lips.

Nick's mouth fell open on the next thrust and he cried out with a moan, the leaves above him rustling with the sound. The river rushed quietly, waves sloshing at the edge of the outcrop they sat on days before.

Ja nevim, Isaiah had said, his mouth moving over the vowels, inexperienced and sloppy.

He continued loose thrusts, hips finding a stable rhythm – up and down, up and stuttering down – until he felt like he was falling apart at the seams.

I don't know why I feel like opening up to you, Nick had murmured. *I*

don't know why I feel like giving you my whole entirety, he thought now.

Then he really thought about it. What would Isaiah feel like inside Nick – pressing himself deeper, and deeper into Nick's body like it would kill him if he didn't? Would he take care of Nick, caressing his skin with soft palms and gentle touches as if Nick didn't want to be bruised raw? Would he listen to Nick's weeping pleas to go faster, to go harder, to give him everything he had?

"Fuck, Isaiah." He came with a choked cry. His cum spurted and dribbled down the scabbed knuckles of his fists, trickling down his wrist and dripping onto his soft belly. Allowing himself a few loose drags of his rough, slick palms, his body slowly untensed. His hands fell away from his dick and he stretched his arms up. With his body shuddering with the stretch of his tired muscles, he forced himself to come back down to Earth, to center himself in reality.

Somewhere to the side of him, by the tree line, a twig snapped, like one of those dumb horror movies where someone was trying to hide in a forest but couldn't bother to watch where they were walking. It could've been a bird, or a fox, or a rabbit – something big and stupid enough to cause a sound.

Nick glared over at the tree line, ready to wave off whatever dumb animal was there.

But there stood thick, warm toned legs with thin, little athletic shorts. Then a dark blue school tee, muscled arms, and Isaiah's shocked face; brows drawn tight into a frown and mouth agape. Nick shared his expression of pure terror.

"What the fuck," he yelped as he scrambled to sit upright and quickly shoved himself back into his shorts — Isaiah's shorts —, and, when he looked back over with an excuse on the tip of his tongue, Isaiah was gone. There were depressed foot prints in the grass where he had stood, like he'd been there for a while longer than Nick thought. His dick twitched at the thought – fucking traitor.

"Holy shit," he murmured,

His heart was beating ten times as fast, rushing out of his body and pulling at him to follow it. He sat there for a few more moments, calming his rushing breath, waiting for it to come back to him as his mind whirred with what ifs. What if Nick went back to the house and Isaiah wanted to talk to him? He'd be pushed back into a corner he'd never escape without telling Isaiah *everything*. And he still didn't know

what that *everything* was.

What if Isaiah completely ignored him – acted like Nick, and whatever he did, never existed? It would hurt, he'd get over it, whatever.

What if Isaiah felt the same? The physicality and the mentality, the burning want and desire, the understanding that nothing could realistically happen between them.

At the worst, Isaiah would pretend like Nick didn't exist. Maybe that was for the best – it was what Nick wanted, wasn't it?

Nick exhaled, and stood up, collecting the beers he never even got to opening, and the scraggy towel. He towelled his damp skin off before wriggling his shirt back on and starting the trek back to the house. The air felt hotter than earlier as the sun inched upwards in the blue expanse of the bald sky. The breeze had tapered off into the wistful creaks of the tall hemlock trees as the tops of their trunks shivered in the soaring wind.

Something seemed wrong, even though it all felt stereotypically summer. But it was like there was something off, like he was missing the bright scent of wild grass, or there was a storm on a thundering path over them and he couldn't sense it.

The door creaked loudly, the sound echoing down the empty, dim hallway, as Nick entered the house. Lily peered from the kitchen archway, poking her head out from behind the doorframe. She frowned at Nick and stepped into the hallway, wiping her hands with a towel.

"You didn't go with Isaiah?" She asked, tilting her head at him.

"What?" Nick frowned at her. He could hear Alex and Kubo's voices booming from the dining room.

Nick approached and entered the kitchen, Lily following him in.

"Isaiah said he was going out today, asked to take the car and everything. He asked where you were, and I saw a towel and two beers were missing, so probably the river." She talked as she went back to whatever she was doing in the kitchen; chopping vegetables for soup it seemed. "He went out, then I heard the car after a while."

Nick just stared at her, fidgeting with the sharp edge of his nail. "I don't know. I didn't see him. He probably just didn't want me to go."

“No, he didn’t seem like he *wasn’t* going to ask you. He sounded more thrilled than anything.”

“Nick is here?” Alex called out from the dining room.

“Yeah,” he answered, padding into the dining room and standing behind Alex. He leaned his hands on the back of Alex’s chair, glancing over the top of his head. On the table and in their hands were the Bohemian cards his grandpa had given Alex. It was some random card game Nick didn’t know, and couldn’t recognize.

He remembered when Alex and his grandpa had tried teaching Nick Mariáš, a game his grandpa used to play when he was a kid in Czechoslovakia, but Nick could never understand the rules. He’d never been the kind of guy to bet on card games, either, so, after three hours of infuriating learning, Nick gave up and never learnt to play Mariáš.

“You didn’t go out?” Alex asked Nick in Czech, although he was completely focused on his cards. He placed one down before glaring at Kubo, the air thick with intense concentration and passion.

“No.”

“Isaiah didn’t ask?”

“No.”

“He seems sweet on you,” Kubo said, putting a card down beside Alex’s. Alex grumbled as Kubo smiled and pulled the cards toward him. Nick really did not understand this card game, and the shock of Kubo’s words kind of pulled him out of it.

“What?”

Kubo glanced up at him, shrugged, then looked back down at his cards, pretending to inspect them. “You know.” He placed a card down. Nick did not know.

“Kubo, please. Leave the boy alone.”

“It’s not like he doesn’t know.”

“I *don’t* know. You’re talking nonsense,” Nick spat.

“English, please!” Lily called out, before grumbling lowly, “Especially when you start raising your voices like that.”

“We’re not arguing,” Nick snapped in English, turning his head to the kitchen. Lily was standing in the doorway with her hands on her hips, giving him an irritated expression.

“It definitely sounds like it. *English*,” she ordered.

“Aye, aye,” Kubo howled in a thickened accent. “English, all for you, madam–...” He broke off into Slovak when Alex put down his card beside Kubo’s, “You *sviňa kurová*! I had that hand. Curse you! Stick a dick up your arse and shit it out your mouth!”

Alex doubled over in teary-eyed laughter, slapping his hand on the cards and pulling them towards him. Kubo stared daggers at Alex, his cards bending in his tightening grip.

“English!” Lily yelled.

“Clearly, our language is superior,” Kubo stage whispered in Slovak.

Nick shook his head at both Alex’s wild laughter and Kubo’s audacity to point something out when nothing was there. He wandered back into the kitchen, and rested his forearms on the counter, hands clasped and balled into a tight fist.

Lily eyed him with a soft gaze. Her mouth opened slightly, before she sighed and shut it. Nick frowned, standing up straight.

“Are you okay?” She asked.

“I’m fine.”

“Nick,” she said. “If there’s anything you want to tell me, you can. I don’t want you to think I’m someone who will push you away if you open up to them.”

I’m not your father was what she was really saying. He could read her words clear as day, and she knew that he knew.

“Did Isaiah ask you to go with him?” She asked simply, but it felt like there was something else in her tone that he couldn’t catch this time.

He hesitated, glancing over his shoulder at the door — his only exit. But Lily caught his gaze and held it tightly.

“I don’t know.”

She nodded as he shook his head.

“I don’t know,” he repeated. *I don’t know what you want from me. I don’t know what you want me to say. I don’t know what I want to think.*

“It’s okay,” she murmured softly, resting her hand on his forearm. “It’s *okay*. I’m here, always. If you need to talk, if you just want to sit in silence — I’m here.”

Tears welled and threatened to spill, his chest concaving with the overwhelming knowledge of her simply gentle comfort. He was never one to accept other’s consolation so easily, to take their offered support and find relief in it. He also knew that it was one of his problems — one of many.

“You remember when Alex and I visited your grandfather when you were starting high school?” She said as she let go of his arm and started stirring the sautéing vegetables in the pan.

Nick squinted at her. “Maybe.”

“When we had the dog, and your sister was sick with the flu and would steal the dog all the time to nap with him.”

“…Yeah.”

“You told me that you were so scared to go to school because you didn’t know if the other kids would make fun of you,” she said quietly, putting the spoon down on the counter and gazing at Nick’s crumpled face. “Because of your accent. But it was really because you were struggling to make friends.”

“What is this? A fucking therapy session?” Nick sneered, stepping backwards, but Lily grasped Nick’s arm once again and held him in place.

“Nick. You’ve always had a hard time talking to people, and especially forming connections.”

“The fuck are you getting at?” He grimaced, though his voice was meeker. He felt all of the raging energy slump from his body, leaving him a soppy mess under Lily’s gentle glare.

“I’m saying you’ve finally made a real friend, and you’d do well to keep him around.” She let go of his arm, but it still felt like she had a grip on him. “Never once did you come to me and tell me you were scared that you wouldn’t get along with Isaiah. And I *do* think you were scared, but I also think you were much happier than you were

fearful."

"It's not anyone's business."

"Please don't become the kind of man your father is. The last time I talked to him was when he brought you here. Before that, it was at his wedding with your mother. And he hadn't even talked to Alex for over two years until he called a couple months ago." She looked back at the crisping vegetables, hissing and spitting in the hot oil. "I do want to talk to you, Nick. I want you to tell me about your day, about what's going on in your life. I know you're not related to me by blood, but it goes deeper than that." She smiled sadly at Nick. "You're like a son to me."

Nick thought he'd start crying right in front of Lily, right in front of Alex and Kubo, right in front of Mary as she stared at him from behind her closed eyes, from her comfortable spot in the glass door cabinet.

"What are you saying?"

"I'm saying *trust* me. Whatever you believe is wrong about you, I believe it's right." Her eyebrows scrunched before she said, "Unless you're doing drugs. Then that's wrong, and you should tell me if you *are* doing drugs so I can get you help."

Nick laughed wetly, rubbing his eyes with the heel of his palm.

"Not doing drugs."

"Good." She sighed. "Just— Nick. Tell me when something is wrong. I'm not here to make your life more difficult. I'm here to help."

They stood there quietly for a comfortably long moment or two until Lily swore and turned back to the vegetables, picking up the spoon and giving them a quick stir.

He hesitated, stepping away before turning back, fidgeting with his pant pockets — Isaiah's fucking shorts that Nick just jerked off in and still hadn't cleaned — and glancing between Lily and the vegetables that were another degree away from burnt.

"Thank you," he muttered.

Lily smiled at him and just nodded.

He took it as his cue to leave and he rushed upstairs to take a scalding

hot shower, letting the water burn his already stinging skin. Under the blistering spray, he scrubbed Isaiah's shorts with soap suds and his hand, and left them to dry on the towel rack. He sat in his room in a towel until his skin completely air dried, and then he changed into something comfortable in which he could stand the settling heat of the day.

For the rest of the day, he hung around Alex and Kubo: watching their card game he still didn't understand the rules of, even when Alex translated Kubo's snappy explanation of it; sitting in the barn like three old, Slavic grandpas, chatting about this's and that's that had no more importance than a dead fly. Otherwise, he helped Lily with dinner and the re-sorting of her worn college books in Alex's old study.

Dinnertime came and went. Isaiah still hadn't come back — he'd been gone for a couple hours, but it wasn't like anyone was counting. Alex kept glancing at the clock while they watched a show in the living room. When it chimed at midnight, he proclaimed his bedtime.

Nick knew he'd have to go to sleep soon, but he was conflicted. Was going to Isaiah's bed weird? But was it also admitting something happened? Did Isaiah want to pretend it didn't?

He found himself standing before Isaiah's bed, the blankets kicked down to the end of the bed, the pillows dented by the heads of two, and not just one. He sat down on the edge of the bed and ran his palm over the wrinkly sheets where Isaiah had laid – quiet, peaceful, and more beautiful than anything Nick had ever seen in his life.

The window was open, the curtains waved with the gentle, warm breeze that drifted into the room. It blew over his face, caressing his cheek with mellow tendrils of soothing air. He sighed and laid down, balling the sheets in his clenching fist.

Nick knew he drifted off into fitful sleep because he awoke to a loud thud and a snicker that was so obviously Isaiah. The door opened with an echoing squeal, and Isaiah hissed in response. Nick squeezed his eyes tight and groaned softly as his head pounded at the sudden, loud noises.

He felt the bed dip beside him, and he opened his eyes to see the vague shape of Isaiah crawling onto the bed and pulling the blanket up over his shoulders. He smelt like twenty bottles of shitty vodka and rancid beer.

“Fuck,” Nick cried. “You smell like shit.”

Isaiah chuckled something sweet and laid his head on Nick’s pillow, pressing their foreheads together. Isaiah’s skin was cold and clammy, but Nick pushed back into the simple touch. In the dim light of the moon, he could see Isaiah’s smile falter and his eyes gleam.

“You’re drunk.”

“No shit,” Isaiah said, with a twitch of a smile.

“Where the fuck were you?” He murmured, his eyes fluttering shut.

“I ran away,” Isaiah slurred. Nick wrinkled his nose at Isaiah’s breath that he was sure was mostly ethanol. “I ran far, far away.”

Nick frowned. “What?”

“I ran away,” he whispered

“Why?”

“Because I’m scared,” Isaiah said, his voice softening against the otherwise loud silence surrounding them. Aching sleep tickled at Nick, and he fought back a yawn. “There’s things I keep thinking about – things I can never have, or want, and I’m so scared.”

“What the fuck?” Nick sighed, before his tiredness grasped him and dunked him into the cold, shivering water of gnawing slumber.

Isaiah wasn’t beside Nick when he woke up. His hand grazed the cold, white sheet, the sunlight streaming across his hand, highlighting the freckles he didn’t know he had there. He brought his hand to his face and gazed at the three freckles on the web stretching between his forefinger and thumb.

He wondered if this is what Isaiah felt when he woke up the morning before – lost, and disoriented when he knew there *was* someone in the bed with him at one point. Did he feel that childish ache in his chest when he realized Nick was gone? Did he miss him in those moments?

Nick rested his hand on his mouth, the freckles pressed against his chapped bottom lip, and he sighed, his breath christening his skin with its gentle air.

Alex and Kubo were in his study, arguing about Slovak narratives in

Bohemian children's books. Lily was in the living room, curled up against the arm rest on the couch with a book in her lap. She glanced at him before turning her attention back to the book. He noticed the Czech letters in an instant as he glanced over her shoulder.

"You can read Czech?" He asked.

"Not too well," she said with a sigh, shutting the cover of the book. She looked up at him with wistful eyes.

"You want me to teach you?"

"No. I can do it on my own."

Nick burst out into laughter, and Lily frowned at him.

"You're so stubborn. You live with *two* Czech speakers, but won't take help from either fucking one of them." He shook his head.

"Maybe I want to do it on my own."

"You can't."

"I can!" She yelped, her shoulders tensing. "Watch me."

"Yeah, well, if you need help, just ask." He didn't mean to make it sound like he was mocking Lily's earlier words, but his tone spiked in the wrong vowels and made him seem cruel.

Her frown deepened and she gazed at Nick with pure hurt.

"I, uh–... If you actually need help, I can teach you."

Lily cracked open the book and glared down at the words like they were the problem.

"I'm not just a pretty face," Nick said with a wavering smile, but Lily didn't look at him to see. He sighed, and stepped backwards into the hallway. "Where's Isaiah?" He asked.

"He said he was going out to the McAffey's paddock," she said, her voice small.

Nick nodded, and hesitated for a moment. "Sorry," he muttered before shouldering the front door open and heading over to the McAffey's plot. It was far behind the barn, a patchy field of wild grass that hadn't been taken care of for years. The grass waved as he passed by,

peering over their spiky tops to see if Isaiah was laying in their bedded swards. There was a break in the wire fence that a small path cut through, and Nick followed it into the field. After a few more meters, there was a trodden offshoot. He glanced past the tops of the thinning grass, seeing just a vague glimpse of a dusky blue.

Nick approached Isaiah, his heart kicking up into a wild trot at the sight of him just lying there in the grass, an arm thrown over his eyes, and the other resting on his stomach. His legs were outstretched and crossed at the ankle – he remembered how Isaiah's hot skin felt against Nick's; his ankles, his sweating forehead, his hand.

Is that what Isaiah felt when he saw Nick by the river? That heart racing, hooves beating against the heavy prairie soil, skin shivering in the winter feeling. He wasn't even doing anything sexual – just lying there, body relaxed and melting into the grass like there wasn't anything to stress about.

Maybe Nick had been stressing over nothing. Maybe it was nothing. Maybe Isaiah hadn't actually seen or heard him in his vulnerable state. Maybe Isaiah didn't actually look like he wanted to kiss Nick dumb every time they saw each other. Maybe Nick was fucking delusional.

Nick stepped over towards him and slowly lay down beside him, a couple inches apart. Isaiah had moved his arm behind his head and was watching him stretch his legs out. Nick intertwined his fingers and rested his hands on his roiling stomach. He didn't dare look at Isaiah.

"Where'd you go yesterday?" He heard himself say.

Isaiah was quiet for a few moments before huffing. "Out."

"With who?"

"Why's it your business?"

It felt like an argument they had once before in a time where Nick looked at Isaiah with anger and jealousy, instead of the painful, sickly impulse of his wanton desire.

"You were gonna ask me to–," he searched for another word that wasn't *come*. "Go."

He turned his head to look at Isaiah, but Isaiah was already looking at him. There was a small smile on his pretty lips, calling wordlessly to

Nick like a siren's song.

"You seemed busy."

"A little."

They observed each other for a while, soft smiles on their face. Silence held them in its sweet embrace, only interrupted by the ruffle of the grass fluttering in the wind and a bald eagle squawking in the distance.

"Was worried about you," Nick murmured.

"That's news."

"Could've crashed coming back."

"You don't seem like the type of guy to worry about that kind of thing."

Nick frowned. "You know nothing about me."

It was Isaiah's time to laugh, the air of his breath grazed Nick's face, no longer scented by alcohol, but by bubblegum toothpaste instead.

"I think I know enough," Isaiah said, eyes fluttering under Nick's gaze. His eyelashes caught the sunlight, and they shimmered a translucent gold. Nick thought he saw Isaiah's face move closer, his breath tickling Nick's jaw and eyes closing, before Isaiah swiftly stood up.

Nick frowned, watching him stand.

"Where are you going?"

"Alex wanted the trees watered before harvest."

Isaiah started walking off, and Nick dropped his head back against the ground, the grass brushing through his hair.

"Are you coming?" Isaiah said. When Nick glared at him, Isaiah was smirking with a knowing glint in his eye.

"Fuck you," Nick said, sighing exasperatedly as he stood up. At least Isaiah wasn't acting awkward around Nick.

He followed Isaiah closely back to the orchard. The trees were lush with maturity, bloated with thick, green bushes of leaves and fat, ripe

peaches. Their splotchy, red and peachy skin was fuzzy and glowed in the sun. He fought the urge to pluck one right then and there, but Isaiah cut to the chase and pulled a particularly plump peach off a stubby branch. Isaiah glanced at Nick's frown and grinned.

"When were you such a stickler for obedience? It's not like he's gonna know."

Nick stepped away, grumbling, but Isaiah was hot on his trail.

"*Come on*, take a bite." He waved the peach under Nick's nose, and Nick pushed his arm away.

"Yeah, fuck that. You didn't even wash it."

"Seriously?"

"Seriously."

Isaiah laughed, squinted eyes brightening at Nick's smile that slowly broke across his face. He shook his head as Isaiah eyed the peach. It wasn't actually dirty, its ruddy skin completely clean from Alex watering the leaves the day before. Nick just wanted to be a little shit, but his smile faltered as Isaiah spat on its skin, his saliva dripping from its side. Nick groaned – ignoring the way his stomach flipped and his dick swelled – and pushed Isaiah away as he laughed and rubbed his spit into its skin. He held it out to Nick with a lopsided grin.

"Clean?"

"You're fucking disgusting."

Isaiah shrugged and brought the slick peach to his mouth. He slowly bit into it, barely breaking eye contact with Nick.

"Still tastes good," he muttered around a mouthful of peach.

Nick's face furrowed and he ambled off toward the lawn chair still sitting outside the barn. He wordlessly hoped Isaiah was still following him. Water dribbled from the tap, squeezing under the duct taped barrier. Nick tried to not stare at the rhythmic dripping as he sat down on the lawn chair.

Isaiah sat in front of him in the grass, leaning back on his palm and bringing the peach to his mouth slowly like he was in some dumb

fucking ad that was trying to sell sexy peaches to Nick.

But there was also something so purely intimate in the way he suckled on the peach; tonguing the sweet flesh, ripping off the skin, and chewing the mushy, tangy meat with a complete gentleness. He got down to the pit, biting chunks away from the brainy pit and tonguing the folds, kissing the saccharine juice away with a loud slurp.

Syrup dribbled down Isaiah's face from his glistening lips, caught in the stubbly hair on his face, and the groove above his chin, dripping down until it beaded under his jaw and dripped onto his shirt.

Isaiah hummed as the nectar pooled in his palm and started trickling down his bare forearm, beading at his elbow.

Nick wondered, just for a moment, if he could have leaned over and kissed the juice off his skin, licking the trickling syrup up his arm to his hand, where he'd suck the pooled juice. Would Isaiah take his face and kiss him, mouth filled with the remnants of a once-sweet peach, tongue drenched in the juice as he twirled his with Nick's? Nick would taste peach, the tangy and sweet colliding in war over dominance, as he licked further into Isaiah's mouth, tonguing the teeth that bit the peach and dragged over the flesh-filled grooves of the pit.

Would Isaiah taste like the sugary peach koláče his grandpa used to make when the fruit were in season, and would Isaiah be as willing to let Nick bite into him as the koláče were, chasing nostalgia and what-once-was — even though he knew what the past held could not be brought forth any longer?

Did Isaiah even *want* to kiss Nick?

He had this weird idea that Isaiah did, but, in all his relapsed honesty, it could've been his delusion, seeing things that weren't there.

But Nick *saw*. He swore he did.

He saw how Isaiah reacted to Nick; his words, the way he acted, how he thought about himself. It was the twitch in his brows, the squinted eyes, the tensed shoulders. Isaiah acted like Nick couldn't tell he had an effect on him, it was kind of funny.

Isaiah swallowed and frowned at Nick. "What?"

"Nothing."

He held out the peach – or, really, just the dark pit with a few chunks of remaining flesh – and tilted his head, his ear almost grazing his shoulder. “Want some?”

“Fuck no. Not after you fucking spat on it.”

Isaiah laughed, then chucked the peach pit over his shoulder. He sat up and manoeuvred to crawl over to Nick.

Entranced, Nick stared at Isaiah’s muscled arms holding him up, and the long line of his back, and his rounded ass in his tight jeans, and his brown eyes full of uncomplicated want.

Fuck.

He tried to look away, but, suddenly, Isaiah was on his knees in front of Nick, hands braced on Nick’s lower thighs. His breath was snatched by the grip of something otherworldly as his gaze darted over Isaiah’s face. Isaiah looked at Nick so simply, like what was happening wasn’t fucking stupid, and wasn’t fucking crazy, and wouldn’t fucking ruin whatever they had between them.

Nick wanted to grab Isaiah by the collar and smash their lips together, but he also wanted to push him away and run until his legs gave out. But, in all realities, he was stuck to the chair like someone had glued him there, and he wasn’t moving in any foreseen moment.

“Do you want to taste it?” Isaiah whispered, eyes hooded as he looked at Nick’s lips.

“Kurva,” Nick sighed, his legs falling open unconsciously.

Then, their lips crashed together in a wild tangle of slick tongues and dry lips. Nick’s chafed as Isaiah licked them, their teeth clacking as Isaiah grinned awkwardly into the kiss. When Nick nipped Isaiah’s plump lips, he gasped into Nick’s mouth. He wanted to hear that sound forever, even if it killed him.

Isaiah tasted like fresh peach, tangy and fruitful, like a burst of color against their twirling tongues. He tasted like sweet river water, the sunlight glittery against the curls of waves. He tasted right, like there was good in the world and Nick couldn’t see it before now.

Nick wanted more, and he wanted less. He wanted to push further into Isaiah’s mouth, make his home there and never leave. But he also wanted to put an entire continent between them to make sure he’d

never see Isaiah again – not because he didn't want him, but because it hurt that he'd never have him forever.

He was terrified the intimacy of *them* would shatter, that there'd be nothing left between them. He was terrified of what the world would do to them when it found out.

He frowned, hesitantly kissing Isaiah once more before pushing him back. Isaiah kept him close though with a hand on the joint of his jaw, and the other tangled in the waves of his hair.

"Don't run away," Isaiah murmured, voice hoarse and lips reddened and slick with spit.

Nick never promised anything. His chest ached as his heart beat against it like it was trying to violently escape. His lungs were constricting and he desperately needed space to breathe. He shook his head and pushed Isaiah away, standing on shaky legs and rushing through the rows of peach trees without looking back.

He needed to leave, to get away from the orchard. He grabbed one of the bikes leaning up against the side of the house and swung his leg over the seat, pedalling off down the driveway.

The road got rockier as he rode further away from the orchard, gravel kicking up at his heels and biting his skin. He skirted just around the town, trailer homes and suburbs passed by him. He pushed his muscles to the limit, dragging his body through stiff air. It relaxed him, almost, like exerting the energy out of his body was also dissolving the building rage. Dogs barked, kids yelled, cars drove around him. Only when he was past the town and on an offroad leading uphill could he breathe.

It levelled off into a straight road bending around the base of a short mountain. Trees hugged the side of the mountain, trunks gripping onto the slippery ground. There was a shoulder beside the road overlooking the town. Nick braked to a swift stop and got off the bike, dropping it to the ground.

He gasped for air, breathing in thin gusts and exhaling hard, before dropping to sit on the ground. He wrapped his arms around his bent legs and pressed his forehead to his wrist, panting into the space he created between his body.

"Fuck!" He yelled, shoulders tensing.

After a while, his breathing evened and he lifted his head. The view before him was spectacular. All the wonder of south-eastern Pennsylvania flooded his senses, plated before him like a ten course meal. The historical buildings lining the boulevard of the old, settlement town. The forest to the south that was divided by the sparkling river. The mountains that circled the area like a wall, shielding the city from the cold northern winds. The scent of old oaks and maples, the sweet chirpings of birds and the rustle of leaves.

For the first time, Nick didn't feel the need to be angry. There was no door to punch, no wall to slam something against, no one to take it out on. But there was also no urge to do those things, to subject himself and someone else to his unbidden rage. He felt… comfortable. He felt calm, justified.

Nick didn't want to use his hands for anger, he was tired of that. He wanted to run them through someone's hair instead, drag his palms reverently down their skin to demonstrate his trusting care.

He wanted to touch Isaiah gently, cradle his head in his lap as he twirled his fingers in his curls. Wanted to talk to him like they were lovers, kiss him over and over again just to see if the first would be like the rest.

He could still taste peach nectar and Isaiah's gasp on the tip of his tongue.

Chapter 3: Whiskey and Cigarettes

Chapter Notes

> hi! this was a beast to write. i have an essay due tmrw so i really wanted to pump this out before i go crazy analyzing hamlet. sorry this took so long, school has been a pain in the ass.
>
> because this chapter is so language heavy (including four languages, oh lord), and i know translation tools are not accessible for everyone, i've included translations of the majority of the words/sentences in the end notes.
>
> enjoy!

See the end of the chapter for more notes

In that singular, fleeting moment, Isaiah knew he had fucked up.

There wasn't much else to it. For half a minute, he swore he saw God's peace. A flowering, glowy love that encompassed him from within, warming his rattled bones into goo. His fingers entangled in the short hair at Nick's nape, the crutch of his jaw heavy in his palm. The welcoming space between Nick's thighs and his hand gripping Isaiah's shoulder as if he'd disappear if let go.

Isaiah thought it was perfect, until the haze shattered from just a single hesitant kiss and a push. He'd held Nick tight in his grip, wordlessly willing him to exist in the moment instead of denying the comfort of it.

He tried. He swore he did.

But Isaiah still didn't understand Nick. All of his intricacies kept shifting, moving like northern glaciers. Cracking under the pressure of their own weight, their rumbling heard from miles away, but their echoes could never be pinpointed. Isaiah's voice wasn't loud enough to be heard over the growling thunder in Nick's head – he wasn't even sure he ever would be.

Isaiah had fallen backwards on his ass when Nick pushed him away. The short grass prickled at his palms that once held Nick's face, scratching the memory away. He watched as Nick stormed away, the line of his shoulders bowing as he tensed. The trees ruffled with discontent as he breezed past and disappeared into the rows.

And in an instant, Nick was gone. All that was left of him was the way he tasted on Isaiah's tongue, pliant under his own, and the echoing feeling of his heartbeat reverberating through Isaiah's chest when he pushed harder against his body. A ghost of Nick attached itself to Isaiah, the feeling that he was still there wrapped around his body; the brush of their shirts, his tentative hand on Isaiah's shoulder, his quickened breath blowing over his wet lips. It grasped Isaiah and whispered "*I'm still here*" in its flaws and flagrant anomalies.

What would Nick have done if he'd heeded Isaiah's plea? Would he still have run away? Was that just in his nature – was that how it was always supposed to play out?

Destiny carved Nick's lips against Isaiah's, but it also carved his escape into the universe's fate. Was destiny fairer to those who found it easier to follow it?

"Fuck," he sighed.

Isaiah pulled his knees against his chest and hugged them, head dropping into the quiet, dark space between his legs and his body. He could hear his heart drumming against his chest, he could feel the breeze dragging through his curls, he could smell Nick around him – his aftershave, his eucalyptus body wash, the faint aroma of stale cigarettes.

Embarrassment overshadowed any other raging emotion coursing through his veins — that sickly, heart racing feeling that felt more like someone was kicking him in the chest. He fell back against the spiky grass. It tickled his face and plump lips slick with shared spit, taunting him with more than what he was given.

But Isaiah *knew* Nick wanted to kiss him, or at least he thought he did.

Those looks — eyes lidded with hot desire, his gaze licking flames across Isaiah's body, nostrils flared whenever he glanced his way, mouth parted hungrily —, those touches that always seemed purposeful: soft, accidental grazes; his strong, sure grip on Isaiah's hand as he pulled him up that outcrop. Every single moment snowballed into some kind of strange delusion that made him believe Nick liked him some way or another.

And the way Nick was practically jelly under his touch, softening into his palms and against his lips. Fuck, he even kissed *back*. His tongue was in Isaiah's fucking mouth, licking him like he was sticky, vanilla icecream on a hot day. And he swore he heard a low groan under the

fucker's breath, a quiet prayer for Isaiah to keep going hidden in his growly moan.

Isaiah thought he was good at reading people — great, even. But Nick was apparently an outlier, far outside the boundaries Isaiah stuck to.

Was he stupid, or was it Nick's reluctance?

He probably shouldn't have been surprised. Nick was like a caged animal set free but still only saw the boundaries of his cage. What that cage was, he wasn't sure. Maybe it was his dad, maybe his criminal record, maybe it was his culture — maybe it was just his internalised hatred of being something other than what he wanted of himself.

Isaiah wasn't a therapist at the end of the day. He wasn't paid to pick apart each layer of Nick and analyze his problems and where they stemmed from. He could've been entirely off the mark, or spot fucking on. That was how unpredictable Nick was. A roiling sea churning with crashing waves and periodical calmness, and Isaiah was a lost ship right in the middle of a rumbling storm. Despite that, it felt wrong to try and find safe harbor, to escape murky waters for peaceful skies. It felt wrong turning his back on Nick just because he didn't want something Isaiah did.

Isaiah laid in the grass for a few more minutes, contemplating whether to kill himself and save himself the future embarrassment, or pretend like nothing happened, like last time — looking back on that now made it seem so much more revealing than he originally thought it was. Isaiah was entirely wrong to just stand there and watch Nick jerk off like a deranged fucking pervert, but he couldn't ignore the unmistakeable moan of his name. All three syllables morphed into one long string of a whine, panted in his harsh breath. It was distinct, it was raw, naked craving, and it was fucking hot.

So, Isaiah *thought* that was evidence Nick saw him as something other than a friend.

He could ignore it, pretend his rushing and burning desire didn't exist as it tore through him from the inside out, because the probability of Nick coming back around, and seeing Isaiah like that as well, was close to none. It was kinder than pushing Nick continually until the edge where he *still* wouldn't even open up to Isaiah. Just ignore it and let slow time pass, waiting till the achy feeling went away. It was easier than letting juvenile emotions get a hold of him.

Isaiah didn't see Nick until the next morning. He didn't know when he came in, but it must've been late. Obviously, he had slept on the couch — Isaiah wasn't expecting anything else.

Lily and Alex hadn't seemed to notice anything weird between them at lunch, or they were just choosing not to say anything.

The bologna sandwich in front of him was cold and sad, and Alex and Nick's terse conversation wasn't helping Isaiah feel any more comfortable. They were speaking Czech — some days it felt like they *only* spoke Czech — in hushed tones. Isaiah tried to ignore the frown on Alex's face that made him look like a disgruntled father. He could only guess what Nick was telling Alex, and all of his guesses terrified him.

Lily, however, was happily chomping on Kubo's homemade pickles, and chatting with him about his new job.

"Ah, well, physical security is big thing nowadays. You can never be too careful," Kubo said.

"I'm sure there's lots of important people to protect in that city."

"We shall see. Definitely not the president, I doubt. They would not want a foreign with secret, hidden weapon protecting our president." He smirked, and Lily laughed in response.

"I'd take the chance. Those poor people stuck between his wars, and he's sitting in office with a glass of whiskey like nothing is happening."

Kubo hummed in agreement. Lily sipped her tea before shaking her head.

"I used to be so patriotic before Alex came into my life. I thought this nation was perfect, you know? But we really were just cowards brave enough to toe the line of global destruction."

Kubo nodded. "Alex is lucky his parents got out so early. My father protested Soviet invasion for years, until he fled to America with me. It is disheartening having to give up because there is no more fight in you. That was how he described it to me."

"What happened to your mother?" Lily asked.

"Shot during Prague Spring. She was student protestor. They did not

like that she was obstructing."

"Oh, I'm so sorry."

Isaiah looked down at the crumbs on his plate. Alex and Nick had silenced and were listening to Kubo.

"I was only eight." He shrugged like it was the simplest thing in the world; like losing a parent wasn't utterly devastating. "It happened. Life does not stop for death, sadly."

The table fell silent, and Isaiah glanced at Nick. His gaze was settled firmly on the grooves in the table, brow slowly coming together in a frown. His lips were slightly pouted, corners drooping.

"Upřímnou soustrast," Alex murmured.

"Neboj, ty si ju nestrelil."

Nick's face broke into a grin and he — swear to God — giggled, rubbing his palm across his face, as Alex just smiled and shook his head.

When Kubo left later in the day in a great, spectacular fashion (a great big kiss on each of Alex's and Lily's cheek, and a yell of slurred Slovak as he drove away that Alex translated into, "He told us to fuck off"), Nick began to seem quieter than ever before. He and Alex were shuttered up in the study for half an hour, as Isaiah helped Lily bake prune and apricot kolache, until Nick suddenly stormed out the front door.

The door slammed shut, and Isaiah listened to the rumble of the Pontiac and the tires squealing on the concrete driveway.

Alex entered the kitchen, and Lily glared at him.

"What did you do?"

"Nothing! Fuck." Alex sighed, resting his temple against the wall.

"Is he okay?"

"He's fine," Alex grumbled. Isaiah watched as he shook his head and stood up straight, collecting himself. He tried not to care about the way Alex glanced at him with an unsure, nervous expression. "He's just… y'know. In his head about things."

Isaiah's heart reared like an agitated horse, stomping its feet and hissing at Isaiah to get the fuck out of there like it knew Nick told Alex *everything*. From the river, to their conversations, to the kiss – but the rational part of himself knew that Nick wasn't like that. If he could barely tell Isaiah anything, only the lord knew what Alex knew about Nick, if it wasn't nothing. It wouldn't have even been the embarrassment or rage; Nick would've had to first recognize that something was actually happening instead of just pushing it aside like trash, and Nick was completely incapable of that.

After a hearty dinner, Alex asked Isaiah to help out with the truck, muttering something about a flywheel bracket that Isaiah was sure was made up. Music filled the barn, harsh drumkicks and poetic Slovak lyrics bouncing off the wooden walls. Alex was under the hood, definitely banging around with a wrench and doing fuck all. He'd apparently brought the lawn chair back in, boasting from its rightful spot, but Isaiah didn't dare sit in it. It taunted him with a ghostly wind, laughing at his misfortune like an echo of the past.

He leaned back against the work table, arms crossed as he waited for Alex to ask for another random tool he didn't need. Alex was being quiet otherwise, an uncomfortable air sat around him. The hair on Isaiah's arms rose, skin prickling with goosebumps.

"So." Alex broke the silence, straightening up and glancing at Isaiah. His expression was painfully neutral. "How's Nick?"

Isaiah shrugged. "He seems fine."

"*Just* fine?"

His heart skipped a beat.

"I mean, I guess he's doing better." He wasn't exactly lying. Nick *was* doing better in terms of his comfort around Isaiah, and others in general. Having Kubo around the house had settled Isaiah a bit more, offering him that additional smidge of cultural familiarity. But it felt like every time Nick took a step back, Isaiah was at the scene of the crime. Did Isaiah keep fucking it all up — was he the catalyst to Nick's lapses?

Alex was looking at Isaiah like he was supposed to say more, when he really didn't have anything to say. He couldn't weasel into Nick's brain and tell Alex how he was doing. He couldn't make Nick more comfortable. In fact, he did the complete opposite.

He huffed.

“I don’t think he likes me.”

Alex didn’t look shocked. “You don't think he likes you,” he repeated back at Isaiah like he was dumb.

“What?”

“No, nothing.” He shook his head, as his eyebrows rose, and glanced down at the engine bay. “Just, y’know, I don’t think that’s the case.”

Isaiah wished the music was louder.

“He doesn’t tell me a lot about himself,” Alex said carefully as he looked back at Isaiah. “And he’s confided in you, right?”

He blinked at Alex. Either that man was a mind reader or Nick really told him everything. He shifted uncomfortably, the soles of his shoes scuffing against the concrete flooring.

“How do you…?”

“Look, I wasn’t born yesterday. Nick trusts you. It’s obvious he does.”

Was Isaiah that obvious? Had he been looking at Nick with heart-shaped eyes so bright anyone could’ve seen? Did he slip up and accidentally reveal something that was far too intimate to know about Nick?

His ribs cinched his lungs, pressing their pointed tips into his flesh. He failed to still his breath as he lowered his gaze to the ground.

“We’re not—.”

“I know.” Alex’s quiet voice carried softly over the music. “I know.”

“I don’t understand him at all.” Isaiah looked up at Alex, his expression teetering on the edge of sadness and relief.

“No one does, but you can make him trust you enough to *start* understanding him.”

Later, when the sun started illuminating the moon in the darkening sky, Nick came back. Lily and Isaiah were at the dining table playing their fifteenth game of UNO while Alex was, again, in his study. As soon as the door creaked open and slammed shut, Alex darted out of

his study and went straight to the foyer. Nick's and Alex's raising voices filled the silent house, words tensing with each sharp syllable.

Lily blew out a puff of air and placed down a red seven.

"You're still learning Czech?" Isaiah asked, inspecting his cards. He placed down a red reverse and followed it with a two.

"Trying to," she said. "It's much more difficult than I realized."

"You didn't notice before?"

"No." Lily put down a yellow two, and murmured, "Uno."

Isaiah inspected her face; tired, mother-like. She reminded him of his mom when she was halfway through the law classes her boss decided to put her through. She'd leave in the evenings and come home at midnight, slumping into Isaiah's room and cradling his head as if he was still a child. She whispered sweet nursery rhymes in his ear as her manicured nails scratched his scalp gently. The bags under her eyes had been growing, grey lumps at one point, until Isaiah had asked her to change the class schedule. But his mom was nothing if not stubborn, and continued the classes until she was given her credit. He remembered looking into her eyes at one point and seeing something that wasn't his mom. He saw it in Lily, too. That tired disposition that one could never shake no matter how hard they tried.

"Are you okay?"

Lily looked at Isaiah. Truly looked at him, straight into his brain like she was reading his mind. She opened her mouth to speak, but an intelligible yell loud enough to make both Lily and Isaiah jump echoed through the walls, interrupting her. It was followed by the stomping of footsteps up the stairs and through the upstairs hallway, until a door slammed. The house went dead silent.

Isaiah looked back down at his cards. He had a green block and three. He picked up a card — a yellow eight — and placed it atop Lily's two.

"We're doing pick-up-put-down?" Lily glared at the cards, then at Isaiah.

"I thought we established that in the second game."

The phone rang a while past midday, blaring its harsh trill throughout

the still house. Alex and Lily had gone out to go buy sparklers for the Fourth of July, and Nick had locked himself in his room for over twelve hours at that point. Isaiah should've been concerned, but it wasn't the first time he'd done it. He was nervous about the fact that the last time he'd acted like this was just a few weeks before, when Nick was such a shut-in, Isaiah wasn't able to squeeze even a drop out of him. His door glared back at Isaiah, monumental proof that he'd completely fucked up and sent them back to square one — if there even *was* a starting base anymore.

He quickly rushed down to the foyer, and grabbed hold of the handset just before the phone stopped ringing.

"Hello?"

"Hey, Nash!" The voice on the other hand sounded relieved. "I thought for sure Hicks was lying when he said you were in town."

"I'm sorry…"

"Bitch, it's me. Santos?"

"Oh, shit, yeah."

One summer, when Lily was on a health kick, she'd take Isaiah to the farmers market every week to pick up her greens. Santos's family owned a large farm up North that mainly grew mixed vegetables, and sold their imperfect produce at the markets when grocers wouldn't take them. Santos had noticed how often Isaiah came to the market and would chirp at him until he was irritated enough to approach. Then, they became friends. Their friendship was rocky, and Isaiah probably wasn't the best friend ever, but, after a summer spent jumping off rocks into the deep river and tripping people on Main Street, Santos contacted him every summer at least once to see if he wanted to get high or drunk. And drunk he wanted to get.

"What's up with you?" Santos switched to Spanish, simplified — dumbed down — for Isaiah. They both knew he spoke Spanish, or, at least, understood it at a level he could speak casually, and Santos used to tease him for not knowing specific words. But Isaiah's dad never really taught him it. He just kind of picked up on the language after a couple years of his dad yelling at him in Spanish, and high school classes.

"Nothing," he replied.

“Okay, that’s definitely not suspicious.”

Isaiah rolled his eyes. “What do you want?”

“Oh, nothing.” Santos was a shitty liar, and he knew it. Isaiah kissed his teeth, and Santos snorted. “My girl is having a party tonight. She’s inviting all her friends, yeah? You wanna come?”

“You’re always trying to set me up.”

“A man looks out for his boys.”

“Man? Seriously?” A long silence stretched and Isaiah knew Santos was holding the phone away from his chuckling. “Fine, but *only* because I want to drink.”

“Easy, you got it.”

Then he thought for a moment. Nick was upstairs, door firmly locked, a big fuck off sign telling Isaiah that talking was a no-go. *But* he might’ve wanted to get out of the house, get drunk maybe. It would’ve been a weird branch to hold out, but a branch was a branch. And what kind of person turned down free alcohol?

Would Nick have wanted to go, though? Nick liked to drink, he thought. He’d seen the beers in the rumpled laundry of his towel and shirt down at the river, just before something else caught his eye, and Alex let Nick drink a little of Kubo’s vodka when they cracked it open well past midnight. And Isaiah wouldn’t have risked any more embarrassment from knocking on Nick’s door and getting a resounding no; either from getting yelled at, getting plainly ignored, or a punch to the face.

Whatever.

“I got a friend here,” Isaiah said.

“What, like a chick?”

“Man, hop off my dick. It’s Alex’s nephew.”

Isaiah could imagine Santos’s face; brows drawn in tight confusion with pursed lips to go along with it. “Why’s he here? Of all fucking places…”

“Some shit happened.” He paused. “I don’t know. It’s not my place to tell.”

“Damn. How crazy is he?”

“Chill,” Isaiah said.

“He beat someone up?”

“Santos.” His tone turned warning.

“Whatever. Bring him if you want. You coming at least?”

“Yeah, where?”

With the relayed address scrawled on a slip of paper, Isaiah said goodbye, and slowly headed up the stairs. Each step felt like an internal and physical struggle, another pull towards Nick’s door. His legs were like jelly, and his chest was constricting in that unusual way that made him feel like he was actually dying.

Never once had someone made him feel like this.

He had girlfriends in the past; sweet, kind, intelligent girls who cared a bit too much about him for just being a seasonal fling. But they never made his heart beat when they looked at him, talked to him — fuck, even if they just walked into the room, they never made him feel like he was going to combust from the expanding energy deep in his gut.

But Nick… Nick had some kind of grip on Isaiah that he couldn’t shake. Isaiah usually never felt anxious, like it was his biology to always be confident and calm, but Nick broke him down into nothing, rewrote his genes like they were a puzzle, and built him back up into a nervous wreck.

Isaiah stood before Nick’s door, the chipped, white paint glaring back at him. He dragged his fingertips over the rough edge where the paint had fallen off and given way to the treated wood underneath. His hand curled into a fist and he rapped his knuckles against the door.

“What?” Nick’s muffled voice called out, the only thing Isaiah had heard from him in nearly two whole days. He inhaled slowly.

“Can I come in?”

Silence wrapped around Isaiah’s ears, cupping them gently, its thumbpads brushing over his flushing cheeks. He exhaled all of the contained air in his tightened lungs.

“Yeah.”

Isaiah pushed the door open, just glancing through the crack, before widening it further.

On his bed, Nick was laid out on his back with his feet pressed up against the headboard, and a book, opened face-down, on his chest. Nick sat up when Isaiah stepped into the room — he twisted his body to lean on his elbow, chucking the book to the side. He was wearing an old, ratty shirt that had a big hole on the back of the neckline with a bright, yellow smiley face on the front that had started to scratch off. Isaiah only noticed the pair of shorts Nick was wearing when he looked at his bare, muscled legs stretched out on the bed. His – Isaiah’s – shorts wrapped tight around Nick’s thick upper thighs.

The river; how they had looked so perfect on him that Isaiah thought of just giving them to Nick; the wet fabric clinging to his skin as he sat on the edge of the outcrop; and pulled down around the tops of his thighs and hugging his balls so prettily Isaiah wanted to crawl over him and lick the waistband.

“What?”

He blinked and turned his gaze back to Nick’s face. If Isaiah was faintly flushed before, he was surely as red as Lily’s heirloom tomatoes from her garden now, but maybe Nick didn’t notice, because he didn’t comment or make a snippy joke.

“Uh, my friend’s hosting a party. You in?”

“They got alcohol?”

Straight to the point, Isaiah thought.

“Plenty.”

He’d probably have to raid Alex’s liquor cabinet – nothing fancy, just the cupboard above the sink that was always somehow filled to the brim with various vodka brands Isaiah would’ve never been able to pronounce – to make Santos, and his pockets, happy, but sacrifices had to be made sometimes.

Nick frowned, before laying back down with a shrug. “When?” He asked curtly as he picked up the book again and flipped to the page he was on.

“Tonight. We’ll leave when Lily and Alex come back.”

“Okay.”

“Okay, as in…?”

Nick turned his head to glare at Isaiah, but he could see the softness in his gaze. Just that simple look set off blaring warning alarms in his head, screaming at him to run away.

“*Okay*, as in I’ll go.” He looked back at his book. “Need a fucking drink anyways,” he muttered.

Isaiah stood there, gaze fluttering over Nick’s body, from his calves to the top of his head. His hair was always streaky like he was constantly running a hand through it – a nervous tic, a weird habit.

Once more, Nick looked up at Isaiah, a frown growing on his face. The falling sun peered through the curtains and lowered its warm, orange gaze upon Nick’s face, lighting him golden. His mossy green eyes sparkled a bright emerald, pupils dilated wide like drops of ink.

“Are we gonna talk about it?” Isaiah asked quietly.

Nick’s frown deepened, but his eyes never lost the pretty shine as his eyebrows furrowed. He shook his head, hair mussing up against the bedsheet.

“I don’t want to,” he murmured.

Isaiah nodded. “Okay,” he said, stepping backwards into the hallway as slow as possible as if Nick would change his mind. Nick watched him go, their taut gazes never severing until Isaiah shut the door.

With permission given, a car to drive, a bottle of cheap, Slovak vodka stolen from the cabinet, and a guy in the passenger seat he didn’t know whether to talk to or kiss deeply, Isaiah was on his way to Santos’s girlfriend’s place. Rolling fields passed by them in a darkened blur. The sun was spitting out its last fight just before it went to bed; a soft, purplish haze on the horizon.

Once they reached the outskirts of town, Nick shoved the bottle of vodka under the seat and stared firmly out the windshield. Isaiah maneuvered through the suburbs until he hit the area where the houses looked a little shabbier, and, from a distance, found a line of

cars on the sidewalk, and a group of sports cars huddled on the front lawn of a one story house. He parked the car on the other side of the road, and turned it off. Nick was out in a flash with the bottle neck clenched in his fist, and slammed the car door shut behind him.

“Damn,” Isaiah hissed, pushing the door open and hopping out. He surveyed the neighborhood; besides Santos’s girlfriend’s place, the street was quiet, but it didn’t seem like anyone would have any complaints about the sound based on the look of the area. Rap and loud cheers blared from the house, echoing throughout the street.

Nick was already halfway up the lawn, and Isaiah followed him with less haste.

He passed by some guy sprawled out in the grass, chest rising and falling deeply. An empty bottle of fireball laid beside him.

The screen door creaked as Nick swung it open, Isaiah entering the house just behind him. The place wasn’t necessarily packed, but there had to be at least a hundred people inside. Rooms were hazy with thick smoke, the air grey and blurry, and people congregated around tables and sat on old sofas, bottles, cups, and cigarettes in their hands. There was a game of beer pong happening in the dining room, at least a whole cup’s worth of beer puddled on the table from where it splashed out of the red, plastic cups.

Isaiah noticed Santos in the kitchen, his arm slung around his girlfriend’s waist as they chatted. He caught his eye in a moment and they greeted each other with a wave. Nick had somehow started following Isaiah instead, and trudged into the kitchen just behind him.

“This is your friend?” Santos eyed Nick as he questioned Isaiah in Spanish. His girlfriend kissed his cheek and whispered a goodbye before waltzing off. Santos didn’t hide the way he checked out her ass — Isaiah especially wasn’t one to judge either way.

“Yeah. Nick,” he gestured, “meet Santos. Santos, Nick.”

“Slovacek,” Nick said instead.

“Slovacek?” Santos echoed.

Nick nodded, and Santos shrugged in return.

“Alright, me da igual.”

Some guy was standing on a table on the backyard porch, making a heartfelt speech to his friend who'd skipped school for the flu. He yelled loudly over the music and commanded a group of twenty to listen to him.

"Who's here?" Isaiah asked.

"Couple guys. Hicks, maybe. McAffey's back on break. And– ah, coño, Bowman signed up for the Marines."

"Which Bowman?"

"Cody. Y'know, the beefy one."

Behind him, Isaiah heard liquid in a bottle being sloshed around. He glanced over his shoulder to watch Nick swallow a large mouthful of straight vodka. Shamelessly, Isaiah watched Nick's throat bob as he swallowed the alcohol with barely a wince. He turned back to Santos.

"His brother isn't doing it?"

Santos shrugged. "Thought he was going to, but I haven't heard from him since the year before last. Wouldn't be surprised if he already went without telling anyone"

"Shit, maybe."

"Isaiah," Nick murmured in his ear, sweet and gentle like ambrosia and milk. Isaiah turned to him with a questioning frown. "I'm gonna sit down." He jerked his head in the direction of the living room. Isaiah could see a bare couch from over the counter top.

"Alright. You good?"

"Yeah. Don't worry about me."

"Got it."

When Isaiah looked back at Santos, he noticed his pinched expression.

"¿Qué?"

Santos pursed his lips and shook his head. "Nothing. He's… interesting."

"Yeah, uh, he's like that." Isaiah leaned back against the counter, crossing his arms.

“How long’s he been here?” Santos asked as he stuck a hand in his back pocket and fished a pack of cigarettes out. The box was crumpled into a sheet, and the cigarettes looked old, but he plucked one out and stuck it between his lips.

“A bit after I got here in June. He’s from Jersey.”

“City?”

“I think?”

Santos snatched a lighter from the back of someone’s pocket and lit the end of his cigarette. “For him being your friend, you don’t seem to know much about him.”

“He’s stubborn.”

“That’s it?” He said before inhaling a lungful of smoke.

Isaiah shrugged. He knew so much more about Nick than he realized; his rich culture, the deepness of his language, what he liked to eat, his tattoo and what it meant to him, how his body fit perfectly against Isaiah’s, how his groan sounded in Isaiah’s mouth. But it all felt strangely buried, like undiscovered ancient history, hidden under thousands of years of timeless sand, shifting with each forward step he advanced towards Nick with. With each step, he came closer to knowing *who* Nick was, but also so much further as the sand continued to move over his tracks until he couldn’t backtrack.

“He’s not that bad of a guy. He just can’t open up.”

“Can’t, or won’t?” Santos asked, and Isaiah didn’t have anything to say in response. “He’s a scary motherfucker, though.”

Glancing at Nick just briefly, Isaiah *could* agree that Nick looked intimidating. Those eyes that bore into his soul, the way his mouth curled downwards, and the healed broken nose weren’t doing him any favors. But Nick also just looked lost.

He smiled, and shook his head.

“Yeah, he’s a little scary.”

“A little? I feel like I have to keep an eye out on him.” Santos pointed at Isaah. “If he punches someone, you’re both out.”

“The fuck did I do?”

“You’re a package deal. That’s *your* boy.”

He looked over his shoulder at Nick again. He was sitting on the couch with a red cup instead of the bottle. Beside him, a girl held the bottle as she whispered in his ear. She was fucking hot; curled, blonde hair framed her chest, bright, blue eyes Isaiah could see from across the room, a gold, glittery necklace around her neck, and plump, red lined lips that were so close to Nick’s ear Isaiah wanted to wait and see how far she’d go.

A sharp ache punched through his chest, pulsating in his heart and rampaging anger through his brain.

She adjusted her skirt, pulling it slightly up as she inched closer to Nick. Their thighs pressed together, and Isaiah didn’t know whether it was his brain tricking him or what, but he swore Nick moved his leg away from hers. She hadn’t seemed to notice it and sipped from the bottle, coating the mouth with lipstick.

Nick turned his head towards her and muttered something back. Just that simple movement set Isaiah’s chest aflame, a burning wave swelled with each of his slow breaths.

Santos was still talking about whatever, but his words hadn’t registered in Isaiah’s mind. All he could think about was how close she was to Nick, her lips near his ear, her eyelashes batting like some kind of mating ritual.

“I told her we weren’t naming our kid Elivette. God, I love that woman, but she won’t be naming our daughter.”

Isaiah turned to Santos. “Can I get a cigarette?”

“Claro,” Santos said as he held out the pack. Isaiah plucked one that looked less stale than the others and placed it between his lips. Lighter in hand, Santos stepped closer and lit Isaiah’s cigarette.

The smoke rushed through his body as he pulled in, lungs filling with the sickly taste of tar. It didn’t help to soothe that spiky pain under his ribs, but it was a distraction nonetheless.

He took a lone bottle of whiskey from the counter and held it to his lips, hesitated, then swallowed a large mouthful of the amber liquid. It burned on the way down, replacing the tingle of hot smoke with its own kind of fire.

“I need to stop you later?”

“Don’t bother,” Isaiah muttered as he took another swig. He swallowed it harshly and took another drag, chasing the whiskey down with blazing smoke. He sighed the hazy air out before one more quick swallow from the emptying bottle. He hissed against the sting. “I’ll see you later,” he croaked.

“Chau.”

Isaiah twirled the cigarette between his finger and thumb as he approached Nick and the girl attached to his side. Nick looked up as he walked over, brows furrowing into a frown and his lips parting as if he was about to say something. Isaiah turned his gaze to the girl as she stared back at him with a smile that almost looked knowing.

“Hey.”

“Hi,” she said, flicking her hair over her shoulder and shooting a look at Nick. “You’re Isaiah, right?” As she spoke, Isaiah noticed the traces of an accent he couldn’t place.

“Yeah.”

“It’s nice to meet you.” She held out her hand, and, hesitantly, Isaiah took it. They shook hands.

“Nice to meet you too…?”

“Małgorzata.”

Isaiah’s eyebrows raised, and he frowned, running her name through his head. It was obviously European — eastern, maybe. Was she Czech too?

Nick snorted, and turned his face away, scratching at his temple to hide his small smile.

“Just call me Gosia.”

“You’re…?”

“Polish.”

“Ah.”

Gosia glanced at Nick, slowly took his cup with a weird look, then

turned back at Isaiah. “*Okay*, well, I’ll talk to you two later.”

“Zatím čau,” Nick said.

“Do zobaczenia,” She replied as she stood up, straightening her skirt out and fiddling with her hair. “Nie rób niczego, czego ja bym nie zrobiła,” she said to Nick with a smirk.

Nick shook his head.

As she passed by Isaiah, she looked at him with a terrifyingly secretive glint in her eyes that he couldn’t decode. Isaiah turned to watch her enter another room, a loud cheer following her appearance. When he turned back around, Nick was staring at him. His hands were clenched into fists in his lap, lips flattened into a long line, and there was something off about his body language, but Isaiah couldn’t quite tell.

Isaiah shakily brought the cigarette to his lips and inhaled, letting the smoke fill his lungs until full, and then he exhaled. The puff of smoke obscured Nick’s form, his features blurred by wisps of grey. He sighed another cloud out before stepping closer and slumping onto the couch beside Nick.

Nick immediately shifted an inch or two away from Isaiah, and he frowned. Isaiah caught his eye, a spark flickering between the shaky line of contact.

“Didn’t know you smoked, college.”

“I’m full of surprises,” Isaiah said as he brought the lip of the bottle to his mouth. He poured five seconds of whiskey into his mouth, until his mouth was full, and held the bottle atop his thigh as he swallowed. Nick was looking at him still, his gaze softened. Isaiah raised the cigarette and waved it at him. “Want?”

“Alex would beat my ass.”

“You smoke, no?”

Nick’s face shifted into something more relaxed, like he’d recognized something, and then accepted it. What that was, Isaiah couldn’t tell. “Not around Alex.”

“He’s hard on you?”

Nick shook his head. “No. Not like my dad, at least.”

“Come here,” Isaiah said.

“What?”

“Come *here*.”

Nick moved ever so closer. Isaiah placed the bottle of whiskey in between his thighs and slung his arm over the back of the couch, turning his body to Nick. He took another long drag, inhaled, and placed his hand on the back of Nick’s cold neck. His body froze under Isaiah’s palm, and he tried to push him forward.

“Fuck are you doing?” Nick said, but there was no spite in his voice.

Isaiah dragged his hand from Nick’s neck to his jaw, and tapped his thumb on Nick’s bottom lip, the skin dry under the pad of his thumb. Nick’s lips parted, just wide enough for Isaiah to lean forward and exhale the puff of smoke into Nick’s mouth. He listened to Nick breathe in, glanced down to watch his chest expand, before moving back just a bit. Nick followed him like he was expecting more, and Isaiah nervously chuckled, tapping Nick’s jaw to get him to shut his mouth and inhale.

When he pulled back, Nick looked at him with those sparkly, puppy dog eyes, his pupils dilated so wide his eyes were nearly black. God, he looked so beautiful in that moment: his hair sticking to his forehead with a thin sheen of sweat; his pretty lips slightly parted, letting smoke wisp out slowly in streaks; his knuckles whitening as he braced a hand on his knee.

“Exhale.”

“Don’t tell me what to do,” he said, exhaling the smoke. Isaiah dropped his hand from Nick’s jaw, and tapped the ash into the crevice between the couch cushions.

“Nash!” Someone called, and Isaiah looked over as Hicks — that crazed bastard — sat down on the other couch. In his hands was a large bottle of Everclear. Isaiah feared he was drinking it by himself, but he couldn’t have been surprised. “Did you hear Bowman’s gone?” He stared at Isaiah with his offputtingly, wide eyes.

“Yeah, Santos told me.”

“That dick got to Parris Island before me,” he hissed.

“You’re enlisting?”

“Fuck yeah, man. After Iraq, I *gotta* serve my country. Wouldn’t you?” Isaiah shook his head, but Hicks kept talking. “I mean, fuck, what else are we put on Earth to do if God didn’t give man guns?”

“Literally anything else,” Isaiah said under his breath.

Nick suddenly stood, and muttered something about needing air, before walking out the front door. Isaiah frowned and watched him go — had he gone too far with the cigarette thing?

There was that vicious cycle of thinking again; spinning and spinning through his thoughts of *does he?* and *will he?* when Isaiah knew the answer. He still didn’t ignore the way Nick looked at him, or the way he expected Isaiah to kiss him again, and even moved to allow it. He didn’t forget his name in Nick’s mouth when he moaned it out like worship. He didn’t forget the noise he made against Isaiah’s lips.

Nick *probably* wanted him, that was much too fucking clear, but the problem was whether he’d do anything about it. Isaiah knew guys who liked girls and did absolutely nothing about their crushes, letting the attraction simmer until the burner clicked off. Was Nick like that? Would he let his attraction die out because — what? — he was scared? Because he thought it was wrong?

Isaiah watched Hick’s mouth move five hundred words per minute about nothing and everything as his chest warmed with a sadder kind of pain.

If the world was different, would Nick have wanted Isaiah like Isaiah wanted him?

He sighed, and scratched at his forehead.

“What?” Hicks said.

He glanced down at the bottle of whiskey in his lap before shoving it at Hicks as a distraction. “Here.”

Hicks just shrugged and took it.

In Hick’s alcoholic stupor — as in, he started chugging the rest of the whiskey—, Isaiah slipped away to go outside. The sky was almost black, stars shielded by the yellow light of the streetlamps. A couple more cars had shown up, lining up on the opposite side of the street

alongside the Pontiac.

In the overwhelming darkness, he could *just* see Nick's vague silhouette sitting on the porch steps; his shoulders were hunched, tense, and his chin was dropped to his chest. Isaiah sighed, and sat beside Nick, snuffing the cigarette out on the metal skirt of the porch flooring. Red embers died against the cool steel, and ash gleamed in the air.

"You talked to Gosia about me?" Isaiah asked.

"Maybe," Nick said.

Isaiah peered at Nick's profile, tracing the line of his nose with his gaze. There was still that bump on it — some kind of scar. His fist clenched as he fought against the urge to reach out and drag his fingertip down Nick's nose, and feel the bump of the scar.

"What'd you tell her?"

Nick looked at him. Their faces were so close he could feel Nick's breath on his lips. "I told her you're a dick, and I think too much about you."

"Yeah? What do you think about?"

Nick pressed his lips together into a thin line, and frowned.

"What?" Isaiah asked.

"I don't get why you're doing this."

"Doing what?" It was Isaiah's turn to frown.

"Like… trying to be with me."

Was that what he really thought it was? Isaiah was just trying to *get with him*. He wasn't trying to give him all the love his soul could contain, all the attention and compassion one guy could muster. What he was doing wasn't so painfully intimate in Nick's eyes. To him, it was simply a playground crush.

"Really?"

Nick's eyes flashed with uncertainty, and he leaned back as if Isaiah was going to punch him.

“Is that what you *really* think this is?”

“Isn’t it?”

Isaiah rubbed his eyes, pressing them until dots formed in his vision and danced around behind his eyelids. He stood, stepped down onto the grassy pathway, and paced a line back and forth in front of Nick.

Thoughts ran rampant in his mind, and he stilled to make them stop.

“Why’d you run away?” He asked.

Nick turned his gaze down to the ground, fingers twirling and intertwining as he fidgeted.

“I needed space.”

“I thought I gave you plenty.”

“Sure, but you went and did… fucking… that!” Nick yelled, holding his palms out as if Isaiah was insane.

“Did it mean anything to you?” Isaiah spat.

Nick’s eyes fluttered closed and he groaned, dropping his head in his hand. That was more of an answer than anything else he could’ve said.

“Okay,” Isaiah sighed.

“No. It did,” he muttered hesitantly.

Isaiah’s chest thumped at the confession. It was more than enough to send him spiralling.

“So, why did you leave?”

“What else was there to do? You came onto me a bit fucking quick.”

“We could’ve talked.” He shook his head. “I keep forgetting you have no fucking clue how to do that.”

Isaiah listened to Nick’s grumble in Czech. He could barely catch any of the words — not even any of the ones Nick tried to teach him.

“You’re so confusing.” Isaiah shook his head. “Why are you so angry? All the time, I feel like I need to watch what I’m saying so you don’t

fucking blow up in my face. *Why* are you *so fucking angry*?"

"Because I'm scared, alright?" Nick exploded. " I don't know what *any* of this shit is, and I don't know why it's affecting me this fucking much." He breathed in hard, before holding his head in his hands. "Já fakt nechápu, proč tě tak strašně chci. Prostě nevím," he said to the ground.

A few words clicked in his head – translated into Nick's dry voice, hazy in Isaiah's memory, followed by visions of a lazy river beyond the tree line and his lips moving over foreign vowels as Nick gazed softly at him. *Ja nevím*, Nick had said so kindly, even when it was just a joke.

"What don't you know?" Isaiah asked, voice low. "Tell me. Nick, I *want* to know. You probably don't think that, but I *do* actually give a shit about you."

Nick just sat there quietly, rubbing his face with his palm. He sighed, and shook his head. "Can we go back?"

"To the house?"

"Yeah."

Isaiah sighed, shoulders slumping as he began to border the precipice of surrender.

"Okay."

The drive back was silent and tense. The air in the car was charged, sparking at each quiet sound or subtle movement. It felt stretched thin, and any breath Isaiah took, he felt like he needed more.

He was fearful Nick was about to go DEFCON 1 on his ass. Either that, or he'd run away back to Jersey Shore, or wherever the fuck he came from, and Isaiah would never see him again. He didn't know why Nick was like that; so slippery and ungraspable like a fish reeled right out of the ocean. But Nick wouldn't tell him why – he wouldn't tell him what got him to this extreme point of avoidance; why he was stuck in this tempest of pushing and pulling.

Isaiah momentarily thought it was his fault. Maybe he pushed him too far, wanted too much from him. Though, it wasn't Isaiah's hand on Nick's dick as he cried out his name. It wasn't Isaiah's gaze staring

lovingly at him like there was nothing else in the world.

It was *Nick*, and Isaiah feared that maybe someone else had taken over Nick's body like a puppeteer and made him do that – made him want Isaiah.

He watched Nick's face for a while, shadowed in the night, highlighted only by the bright headlights. He looked so fucking beautiful like that, almost angel-like; sent from the heavens to show Isaiah what he *could* have, yet never would.

Maybe there was some sense to the belief that men like him would be lonely forever when God kept sending them untouchable angels.

They pulled into the driveway and Nick turned off the car. The headlights dimmed and they were left in complete darkness, but Nick sat glued to his seat like he was waiting for something to happen. Isaiah grabbed the door handle and moved to get out, but he stopped as Nick cleared his throat.

"You aren't coming in?" Isaiah asked.

"I just need a moment."

Isaiah let go of the door handle. He had one more chance to either fuck everything up, or push to mend it, and the chance was laid out before him. He turned to Nick, who was intently staring down at his hands.

"Nick."

Nick looked at him, his once bright eyes now dark in the night light. His expression was softer than earlier, at least; lips parted, eyebrows relaxed, and gaze softer than fresh snow.

"Did you want me to kiss you?"

In the quiet, Nick's swallow was loud and fucking clear. Isaiah took that as his answer; something so obvious, he should've seen it. He knew he fucked it up, he knew it was the wrong thing to do in that moment. A strong pang of guilt pierced his heart, shattering it into little pieces.

Then, quietly, Nick spoke.

"Yeah."

Isaiah stared as Nick teared up – welling tears shining with the faint moonlight – and hesitantly nodded.

He glanced down at Nick's lips, bitten red and raw. They looked beautifully flush against Nick's pale skin, calling out to Isaiah to kiss them with its reddened blush.

"Do you want me to kiss you?"

Nick sighed shakily, his breath wavering as he frowned.

"Yeah."

"Can I?"

"Fuck, Isaiah. *Please*."

With the simplest of Nick's consent, Isaiah's chest flooded with warmth and an overwhelming joy. It felt so easy, so normal for Nick to just say yes, and please, like he wanted to the entire time they were gravitating around each other.

And Isaiah wanted to say it too. He wanted to get down on his knees and plead with Nick to just *see* him like he had been; a sweet, adoring gaze set upon him. He wanted to whisper agreements and reassurances against Nick's skin until it ached to even speak.

"Wait," Nick said, stopping Isaiah in his surging movement.

Nick shifted in his seat, before moving forward and pressing his lips against Isaiah's. He gasped softly into Nick's parted mouth as he kissed Isaiah recklessly – like there were no repercussions for doing this. Like they weren't fucking crazy, and if they kept going, the world wouldn't feel like it would explode.

Isaiah had been so in his head about a simple kiss that he had forgotten what it was like to kiss Nick for the first time: it was like his soul had crumbled into dust in his own hand, then rebuilt itself piece by piece, reverently touching every single particle and giving it life again; it was like early mornings in the winter when his bed was so cosy, but beyond the blanket was as freezing as the arctic, and he could only favor the warmth for so long until he had to get out; it was like Isaiah could taste Nick's care, his truth, his imperfect being, in his mouth and in the spit on his lips.

Nick pressed his tongue against Isaiah's lips with a quiet groan, and

Isaiah's jaw relaxed at the hoarse sound, letting Nick in without resistance – as if he had any. There was no fight in either of them – no need to push each other away – because they both knew this was all they had left in a shunning world. Isaiah didn't want Nick to run away, and Nick didn't want Isaiah to push him to that edge; that was easy enough.

Isaiah's hands found Nick's jaw, and pushed up into his hair, tangling his fingers in the loose strands. When he tugged gently, Nick widened his mouth. Isaiah took the opportunity to surge forward, and he mapped out Nick's mouth with his tongue like he was the eighth natural wonder of the world. Nick's hand came up to hold Isaiah's wrists, keeping him firmly in place.

Nick slowed down, kissing him once more, softly on the lips, before pulling back. His gaze darted across Isaiah's face, and Isaiah watched the jittery movement of his emerald eyes. He leaned into Nick's touch as the palm of his other hand found Isaiah's flushed cheek, and he moved back in to press a kiss to the corner of his mouth. Then his chin, down to the line of his jaw, and then his neck, where he pressed his face against Isaiah's skin and sighed.

"You taste so fucking good," Nick whispered.

"What do I taste like?" Isaiah asked, voice quiet.

Nick pulled back, much to Isaiah's dismay, and looked Isaiah in the eye. "Whiskey and smoke."

Isaiah smiled, rubbing small circles into the skin below Nick's ear. "Good?"

"Výborný."

"Vyborny?" Isaiah repeated, knowing he fucked up the consonant at the end – but he really didn't care. He had a beautiful guy weak in his hands and under his lips who was looking at him with so much love in his eyes Isaiah wanted to cry.

Nick hummed with a smile. "Excellent."

Isaiah struggled to fight his grin, and he moved forward to kiss Nick again, but a soft press to his chest stopped him. His heart almost broke, and he already felt that rush of blood to his head as he feared Nick would run again.

“I like this, but, just… give me time to think, yeah? I’m not good at this kind of shit.”

“However long you need,” Isaiah said with a confident nod, but he wouldn’t deny he wasn’t disappointed — still, he’d have given Nick all the time in the world if it meant that the thing between them wouldn’t be ignored.

His hands fell from Nick’s face and he turned to wrap his hand around the handle. He was just about to push the door open when Nick stopped him with a hand on his bicep.

“Have you ever been with a guy?”

Isaiah blinked at Nick.

“Like…”

“Like…,” Nick paused, and Isaiah tilted his head. “Physically?”

Isaiah shook his head. Truthfully, he hadn’t been with guys ever — Nick may as well have been his first — and he never really thought about it as a *thing*. Guys existed, sure, but was he double taking whenever he saw a hot dude on the street, or was he imagining kissing one of his guy friends? Not exactly.

To him, there really wasn’t even a difference between men and women. Both had major biological differences that set them apart, but he knew a lot of girls that were like guys, and a lot of guys that were like girls. And he never gave another thought to that unless he had to — even then, he wouldn’t give his two cents.

But now he kind of knew who, and what, he was.

He thought about how it would work; how, if it came to it, Nick and Isaiah would be together… physically, as he put it. It kind of freaked him out. He’d heard of how gay men had sex from a guy he knew back in high school. He, and his controversially older boyfriend, had had sex, and he decided Isaiah *needed* to know about it. The excessive preparation, the raw emotion put into giving someone that kind of trust, the fact that he hadn’t used a condom. Maybe it wasn’t a good first impression, really, but it was the baseline of knowledge he was building off of.

He probably didn’t even need to think about that kind of shit — girls had sex with their boyfriends all the time without penetration. Two

guys could do that too.

Maybe.

“No, but I don’t think it’d be too different from a chick, right?”

Nick’s expression was unreadable, flat. Did Isaiah say something wrong?

“Yeah, I guess,” Nick said.

“Have you?”

“Been with a guy? *No*, uh. No. Well,” Nick fumbled with his words. “I told you why my dad sent me here, right?”

“You beat the shit out of some guy.” Isaiah couldn’t forget that.

“Yeah, well.” Nick frowned, and glared out the windshield. “He tried to come onto me.” He shook his head, slowly looking back at Isaiah. “He tried to kiss me.”

Isaiah frowned. He didn’t understand the full picture — he obviously wasn’t there — but he tried to at least make sense of the pieces given to him. Nick didn’t hurt Isaiah when he kissed him, he didn’t even look like he was angry; he looked confused and scared, like a wounded deer. Obviously, there was a level to the extent Nick knew Isaiah, and not the guy outside the bar. Isaiah just hoped he assaulted the guy out of self defense, and not something else, and that Isaiah wouldn’t be in the firing line when Nick hadn’t drank or was standing on less stable ground.

“You’re not gonna beat my ass for kissing you, right?” He asked.

“No,” Nick said confidently. “No,” he then said more softly. “I want *you*. You’re not some random fucking dude outside a bar. You’re more than that. You’re—.” He sighed shakily. “And if I hurt you, I wouldn’t forgive myself.”

All the comfort in Nick’s voice rushed into Isaiah’s body like a painkiller, slowly dissipating the ebbing ache in his chest. Isaiah nodded and tentatively placed a hand on Nick’s knee. He gently caressed his skin through the denim of his jeans; slow, small circles that he hoped were comforting.

“Just sort your shit out first, Rocky.”

Nick nodded once with a small smile, and Isaiah took it as a cue to leave. He took his hand back and opened the door.

“Are you coming?” He asked as he got out of the car.

“Give me a second.”

“Okay. Goodnight.” Isaiah said, closing the door.

He could hear the muffled sound of Nick responding with a quiet, “‘Night.”

The next day, Isaiah awoke to the pattering of rain against the window. The radio forecasted it to shower for the entirety of the day until around dusk, when it would taper off. Alex was grumbling about the rain at breakfast, and lunch, in a jumbled mixture of two languages. Isaiah knew they were supposed to start harvesting the peaches that week, but with the rain, they had to push the harvest back a day or two.

“At least we don’t have to water the trees,” Lily offered as she grabbed a roll from the basket.

“Thank God,” Isaiah said under his breath, and Nick glanced at him with a smirk.

Nick wasn’t acting weird after the night before, at least. He was still quiet, but he was present in rooms when, before, it felt like he wasn’t even there. They hadn’t talked about what happened, but it also felt like there was nothing else to talk about. Nick wanted Isaiah – though that nervousness of *does he actually?* was still there – and Isaiah was giving Nick the space and time he needed. It seemed unconventional, but it just worked. Nick was smiling, and talking to Isaiah – even in only short bursts, but it was better than nothing –, and it seemed that he realized he did have a place in a room, and no one was looking to make sure he didn’t.

Later in the day, when the rain started to pour down heavier in a flurrying torrent, Nick disappeared. One moment he was in the kitchen with Alex, and then the next, he was gone. Isaiah didn’t want to feel like he had a leash on Nick, but after a while, he did become nervous. He asked Lily where Nick was, and she responded with a shrug and told him he was probably in Alex’s study.

The door to Alex’s study was wide open. Inside was a couch shoved

against the far wall under a large window, beside a tall bookshelf. The room was shadowed as the sun hung high above the house.

In the shadow, Nick laid on the couch, resting his back against the arm. He held a book in his hands, open halfway through it. He looked so peaceful; his face relaxed in the darkness, gaze soft as his eyes flickered over the page.

Isaiah entered the room and shut the door behind him. At the sound of the door clicking, Nick glanced over. As his gaze grazed over Isaiah, a simper twitched across his face. Isaiah stepped over to the couch, and Nick pulled his legs closer to his body to let him sit down. When he sat, he gently pulled Nick's legs onto his lap. He held his ankle, encircling his soft skin with his fingertips.

Isaiah inspected the cover of the book in Nick's hands. The cover was plain black with only text; the title looked like Czech, he thought.

"What are you reading?"

Nick's shy smile twisted into a smirk. "What's it look like I'm reading?"

Isaiah rolled his eyes, and moved his hand to lay his arm across the couch back.

"It's a Czech book. Got banned in Czechoslovakia, but Alex got it from Canada."

"What's it about?"

Nick glared down at the open page, eyes flickering over the words as he frowned. "A man and his wife. He has a side chick, and the side chick has a boyfriend?" His voice was unsure. "And it's about… like… he's trying to decide if his side chick is worth the love he has for his wife." He flipped to the next page. "Or something. It's really confusing."

Nick's face looked so endearing; brows furrowed and bottom lip caught between his teeth as he thought. The wrinkle between his eyebrows deepened as Nick looked back up at Isaiah, and he just wanted to reach and smooth it out under the pad of his finger.

"Come here," Nick whispered with a jerk of his head.

"Say it in Czech."

Nick exhaled through his nose, nostrils flaring. “Pojď sem hned,” he said, voice low and bordering on demanding.

Isaiah smiled — he liked it when Nick spoke Czech. It wasn’t even just because his voice was deeper and rougher in the language, like electrifying beard burn across Isaiah’s skin whenever he heard him speak it. It was also the fact that Nick was obviously more comfortable in it, and knew how to form his thoughts within the words more coherently than English. When Nick spoke Czech, Isaiah wished he knew how to understand it, just so he could appreciate the deeper level to Nick that English couldn’t permeate.

He ran his hand up Nick’s leg as he crawled over his body; his palm dragging over his thigh, up the side of his hip and abdomen, and catching just under his arm. Isaiah’s knees straddled either side of his thighs, keeping all his body weight on his other arm holding him up by the side of Nick’s head. He leant down, not close enough to kiss Nick, but the little space between them was Isaiah's invitation for Nick to initiate anything he wanted; he was placing the choice right in Nick’s palm.

Just after double checking to see if the door was closed, Nick dropped the book face down against his chest and gripped Isaiah’s hips, pulling him down against his body. Isaiah muffled his gasp behind his lips, but sighed as the heat of Nick’s body warmed him.

Blood rushed swiftly downward as Nick pressed his lips against Isaiah’s flushed cheekbone, and then moved to kiss him lazily, tongue just barely brushing Isaiah’s lips. He liked the intensity and passion of the kisses from the night before when their minds were rushing a million miles per hour, but the softness and languor when they were comfortable was by far better than anything else. It made Isaiah feel wanted and cared for.

His dick had swelled under his own weight, pressing awkwardly into Nick’s hip, but Nick didn’t seem to have any complaints as he groaned into Isaiah’s open mouth and subtly thrusted his own hard, hot dick up against Isaiah’s abdomen. Nick’s lips parted and his kisses faltered as he panted heavily against Isaiah’s mouth.

“Fuck, I—,” Nick whined, and Isaiah pulled back to watch his eyes flutter open. His hips stuttered to a stop, and Isaiah stilled. “Not here.”

Isaiah nodded curtly and adjusted to lay on his side beside Nick instead of directly on top of him.

“Sorry.” Nick sighed.

“Don’t apologise,” Isaiah said, holding Nick’s cheek. He melted into the touch, pressing further into Isaiah’s palm. “Tell me whenever you’re uncomfortable. Please.”

“Yeah, okay.” Nick’s eyes closed, and Isaiah rested his head on Nick’s chest, curling his arm around his abdomen. Nick picked up the book that had been squashed between them.

“Can you read it to me?”

Nick was quiet for a few moments before nodding, and shakily read a passage aloud.

“Vzpomněl si na známý mýtus z Platónova Symposia: lidé byli nejdřív hermafrodité a Bůh je rozpoltil na dvě půlky, které od té doby bloudí světem a hledají se. Láska je touha po ztracené půli nás samých.”

Isaiah thought he could fall asleep to Nick’s voice.

Heat prickled at Isaiah’s skin, burning his bare back as he bent over a box of ripe peaches. The rain had passed as quickly as it came, opposing whatever forecast the weather station had spat. The sun was a bright glare in the blue, cloudless sky, glaring down at Isaiah with its rays of deep hatred.

He had shucked his shirt off half an hour into harvest as it was drenched in sweat and the water shaken off the leaves of the trees as he plucked peaches from their branches. His shorts were loose enough to let the subtle breeze cool down his legs — a small reprieve in the heat.

Alex was pulling a filled cardboard box back to the house. The McAffey’s were coming later in the day to pick up two-thirds of the peaches to sell, and they’d harvested around half of the trees at that point.

Isaiah kept seeing short bursts of Nick as they passed each other between the trees. In those moments, he thought he’d die. Sweat trickled down Nick’s face, hair slicked back, and shirt sticking wetly to his skin; small reminders that Isaiah was so attracted to Nick it hurt him deep in his heart. His strong jawline clenched as he dragged the ladder to the next tree; his eyelashes were dark and clumped with dripping sweat, prettily framing his brightened green eyes; his hands,

veiny and thick, grasped around the softness of ripe peaches.

He wanted Nick to absolutely destroy him.

Whatever happened on the couch the day before had been forgotten by the both of them — or more ignored than anything. It was so fucking hot — Nick grinding up against Isaiah's body as he panted into his mouth — but Isaiah also understood that Nick wasn't exactly ready for that kind of thing, especially when they had *just* stabilized their relationship into a steady… something. They were *somethings* that probably weren't having sex for a while, but Isaiah was allowed to still imagine what it would be like nonetheless.

Nick called out to Alex over the music blasting as loud as it could from the barn; a jazz-y song Isaiah could barely understand.

"Musím brzy jít," Nick said once Alex was close enough. Alex responded, though his voice was tense and he sounded almost disappointed.

Isaiah finished another tree, giving it a quick glance over for any peaches he may have missed, before continuing onto the next tree with the cardboard box dragging behind him.

He still had a couple rows to go, but he was so over it. He wanted a cold glass of ice water, an icecream, and a freezing shower to cool his skin — but he retained his slipping patience as he slowly plucked the peaches from the branches and chucked them into the box.

Nick appeared behind him, and Isaiah jumped as Nick's hand gripped his hip, fingers tracing the line between the waistband of his shorts and his hip. He placed a tender kiss to the underside of Isaiah's jaw, then below his ear. His lips were scratchy with dryness, but his wet tongue laved over the prickles and soothed Isaiah's skin.

"Where's Alex?" Isaiah asked over a hoarse groan.

"Went back to the house."

"He'll see us."

Nick continued kissing his neck, and once he felt the bare scrape of teeth, Isaiah pushed Nick away and turned to glare at him.

"No hickeys, asshole."

“You’re paranoid,” Nick said, placing his hand on the wet patch he left on the side of Isaiah’s neck.

“They’re not as blind as you think they are.” Isaiah swatted Nick’s hand away.

“I don’t think they’re blind.”

“Sometimes you act like they are.”

Nick bristled. “When have I ever done that?”

Hundreds of examples ran through his head, but only one stood out to him. “That girl at church.”

“And?”

“You just went and fucked her in the middle of service,” Isaiah argued, but Nick just looked at him like he was fucking crazy.

“I didn’t fuck her, Isaiah. I knew her from the last time I was here.” Nick huffed. “If you really wanted to fucking know, I was talking to her about *you*.”

“Your shirt was unbuttoned.”

“Your shirt was tighter than the pastor’s ass. Couldn’t move without the fucking thing tugging me back.”

Isaiah’s emotions raced through his head, fighting for domination in the depths of his mind. Anger grappled, then anxiety, and then the sweet rush of flailing dopamine spread throughout his body at Nick’s words.

“You talk about me to a lotta girls, huh?”

Nick shrugged. “You’re something worth talking about.”

He flushed, and turned his gaze to the grassy ground, littered with dead leaves and dried, overripe peaches. Nick stepped towards him, and placed his hand on Isaiah’s jaw, forcing Isaiah to look at him.

“Jsi tak krásný,” Nick murmured.

“What’s that mean?”

Nick kissed him as soft as velvet, tongue just barely tasting Isaiah’s

lips. He rested his forehead against Isaiah's and answered, "You're so beautiful."

"Jsi tak krasny," Isaiah echoed.

Nick hummed and leaned back, a grimace splitting his face. Isaiah pushed him backwards with a grin.

"Fuck you, I totally got that."

"Eh." Nick shrugged. "Not really."

"You little shit. Go pick your damn peaches."

Nick walked off with a shit-eating smirk.

For the remainder of the day, Nick was gone. He'd vanished when the McAffey's came to pick up their portion of the peach harvest – Isaiah got to see Ray again, and they talked for a while about life until Ray's dad had to leave – and Isaiah hadn't seen Nick since then.

Twilight took over the sky with its purple haze, and the house was lit by the warmth of the overhead lights and Lily's various vintage lamps. For dinner, the table was laid with plates of cooked roast beef with a tomato gravy, and potato salad and cucumbers on the side. Isaiah didn't question Alex's grim look as he took a seat at the table.

The front door squealed open and slammed shut just as Isaiah sat down. Lily was waltzing into the dining room from the kitchen with a handful of spoons for the salads when Nick entered the room. Alex glared at him, and said something to Nick that obviously put him off. Nick frowned and sat beside Isaiah.

"Bylo to jen lékařské vyšetření," Nick said plainly, picking up his fork and dragging the prongs through the gravy.

"Neměl jsi tam jít."

Nick shrugged, and Alex shook his head with a slow, regulating exhale.

Later, when Isaiah was about to slip under his covers and fall asleep, he saw Nick enter his room. Isaiah went after him, just before Nick was about to close his door.

"Where did you go?"

Nick turned, and his expression faltered in its neutrality. Isaiah could see a chip in the shield that he still had protecting him. He wasn't sure he wanted to see what was underneath, but he truly did want to know who the real Nick was — and he was close enough to see a vague vision of him. Yet, there was still something blocking him from that truth, and it wasn't coming down anytime soon.

"Don't worry."

"I am worrying."

"It's nothing. Just drop it."

"Is it something bad?"

Nick hesitated before speaking. "Not really. Don't worry about it," he repeated, stepping forward to gently push Isaiah out of his room.

"What's going on?"

"I said don't worry about it." Nick sighed, then placed his warm palm on Isaiah's cheek. Isaiah fought the all consuming urge to fall into the comfort of his touch.

"I'm going to."

"Go ahead."

Isaiah huffed, then stomped off back to his room. Where Nick held him, his skin now felt hollow and cold.

Early July had rounded the bend, and Lily and Alex were excited to celebrate the Fourth of July with Nick and Isaiah. Lily had always been the kind of stereotypical American to be awed at spectacular fireworks and midnight diner food, and so she revelled in the celebratory beauty of Independence Day.

Every year — when Isaiah was there at least — the Slovaceks drove down to a field where hundreds of families congregated, watched twenty minutes of fireworks, and then drove to Lancaster to eat greasy diner food. It was simple comfort in the shadow of America's overwhelming patriotism.

Lily was already ready by three, even though, realistically, they only had to leave at a quarter to five. She was wearing something more simple that year; red shorts and a blue button-up she'd raided from

Alex. There was a silver star clip in her chestnut hair. When she saw what Isaiah was wearing as he walked down the stairs, her face dropped.

“You look so…” She frowned. “Like, there’s not much going on.”

Isaiah looked down at his clothes. To be fair, he was just wearing jeans and one of Nick’s black shirts that miraculously didn’t have a stain on it.

“Am I supposed to dress up?”

“Well, no. But, don’t you have anything blue? Or red? Or even white.”

“When were you such a patriot?”

Lily rolled her eyes. “It helps us blend in.”

“With all the white folk?”

He smiled as her mouth dropped, and she slapped his arm. “You know I didn’t mean it like that, Isaiah. I meant the two raging, fucking Slavs who can’t go five minutes without speaking the language.” She walked into the living room, Isaiah following in tow.. “The Soviet Union *just* dissolved and Alex acts like they’re safe. We live in a rural area. People don’t like immigrants out here.”

“What are you scared of?” Isaiah asked gently.

She sighed and rubbed the back of her neck. “I’m not exactly sure. I just feel so tense all the time. Like, I don’t know what’s going on.”

Isaiah didn’t know what was going on either. The weird, secretive conversations in Czech when both Alex and Nick knew Isaiah and Lily didn’t speak it. The times where Nick just left without another word and came back quiet. He wanted to know what was happening; not just so he could be informed, but also so he could help Nick. If it was something to do with his dad, or the courts, he could be there for him. But it was like he was shutting Isaiah out, using his language and the convenience of silence as the blinds.

They left to make their way to the field in respectable time. Lily had goaded Isaiah into wearing a blue shirt (the only one he had was his Model UN t-shirt, but Lily said it was good enough), and Nick was sitting beside him in the car, wearing a dark maroon tee that was

probably Alex's.

Isaiah could already hear the pops and crackles of distant fireworks; the sound of loud, echoing bangs traversed the hilly terrain as bright sparkles lit up the darkening sky. He knew Lancaster would've been lit up by now with homemade fireworks and sparklers.

By the time they got to the field — just some random farmer's plot who graciously let people use it for fireworks as long as no trees or fences were burnt down —, there were already dozens of families sitting on the dry grass. Lily pulled her picnic blanket out of the trunk and Alex was helping to pick out a large enough spot for them to settle down. They rolled the pink and white checkered blanket out in a spot where the crowd wasn't too heavy, and sat down.

Nick sat right beside Isaiah, pressing his shoulder and the line of his arm against Isaiah's.

Isaiah turned his head slightly to whisper into his ear, "Don't do some dumb shit, alright?"

"Like what?" Nick smirked, eyes flickering down to Isaiah's lips.

"You know exactly what." He nudged Nick away, just so they didn't seem to be too close. Nick just pouted and hooked his chin on Isaiah's shoulder. "Get off me."

Nick pulled back, and Isaiah glared at him, but his false irritation faltered at the sight of Nick's expression; he looked fucking hungry, like a starving wolf being presented a plump rabbit in the scarce winter. His eyelids were hooded, eyes almost black as his gaze darted across Isaiah's face, and lips parted with soft breaths.

He was five seconds away from pouncing on Isaiah. And Isaiah knew exactly what Nick wanted, because he wanted it too. It was a bone deep ache he needed to satiate when his own hand wasn't enough — but it wasn't even just because Nick was someone he *could* fuck.

He *wanted* to fuck Nick. He wanted to feel Nick's weight atop him, and under him. He wanted to feel the heat and heft of Nick's dick in his hand as he pumped him, listening to his groans that bordered on pained and repressed. He wanted to shove himself deep inside Nick, feel his whole being from the inside out when he only knew the touch of his skin. The desire was so raw and strong that sometimes he was afraid of it.

“No,” Isaiah said.

“No?” Nick chuckled under his breath.

“Later.”

Nick smirked and leaned back on his hands, staring up at the dark sky.

Lily was checking her watch every minute, as Alex told her to be patient.

Then, in a bright burst of colour, the sky lit up. The sound of whizzing and subsequent popping filled the air, and Isaiah watched the sparkles of blues and reds and whites spread across the sky. Lily gasped and giggled, holding her hands to her mouth as she leaned against Alex. She looked like a little girl, the shimmering lights reflecting in her bright eyes as she watched in amazement.

Isaiah ripped his eyes from the spectacle to watch Nick. He was staring up at the sky, eyes wide and lips parted. A flash of red and blue illuminated his face, and he turned to look at Isaiah. At that moment, Isaiah just wanted to lean forward and kiss the smile off Nick’s mouth. He wanted to hold Nick’s face in his hands like there weren’t hundreds of people around them. He wanted to quietly love Nick in public like other people could. But he knew that wasn’t possible — yet the beauty in Nick’s eyes told him that anything was possible.

Maybe one day he could take Nick’s hand and kiss him without a second thought as to who was watching.

The diner was nearly full. All the booths and tables were packed with big, rambunctious families and loud groups of friends. The tired waitress sat them in the last booth at the back where it was a bit quieter. Nick sat next to the window, and Isaiah sat opposite him. He tried his hardest not to make eye contact across the table as Lily sat beside him.

Alex immediately took to the menu and started listing off things Lily might’ve wanted. She listened intently, eyes darting to whatever Alex recommended on the menu.

Isaiah looked down at his own menu. It was mainly just a bunch of greasy shit he’d still eat anyways. He felt something graze his ankle, and he glared up at Nick, who was inspecting his menu with intense

concentration. Isaiah rolled his eyes.

“What are you getting, Nick?” Lily asked.

“Huh?” Nick raised his eyebrows.

Isaiah hid his snort behind a cough.

“What are you getting?”

“Oh, shit, uh…” He scanned the menu, and Isaiah watched Nick’s face as he bit his lip and squinted his eyes. He liked to watch the way Nick thought, lost in his concentration. Sometimes it was so easy to read Nick because his face was like an open book.

“Isaiah, you thinking of college anytime soon?” Alex asked, voice raised over the yell of a group of teenagers.

The whiplash hit Isaiah right in the head and he fumbled with his words. It was Nick’s turn to smirk.

“Probably. Maybe. My mom would want me to go straight to college, I think.”

“Your mom’s a smart woman. College is good. I hope you go through with it.”

Isaiah thought he saw Alex send a sharp glare Nick’s way, but he might’ve just been imagining it under the bright fluorescent lights.

After dinner (a juicy burger with salty fries, while Nick had a stack of waffles smothered in maple syrup and butter), they started the drive home. Lily was crashed in the front seat, slumped against the door as her breathing slowed. Isaiah was close to following in her tiredness, head lolled against the back of the seat as he forced his eyes open against the bright headlights of passing cars.

Nick was quiet beside him, fingers tapping against the vinyl seat between them. Isaiah glanced down at his hand, before discreetly reaching out and tangling their fingers together. He heard Nick sigh and felt his fingers still in his own.

As soon as they got home, their hands came apart.

Alex and Lily shuttled themselves into their room with a tired mutter of; “We’ll see you two in the morning.”

Nick went to his own room and shut the door, even though Isaiah was completely sure Nick was going to do something that night. But it wasn't that big of a deal. He was patient before, and his patience never stretched thin. If Nick didn't want to do anything… Well, that was his boundary.

Isaiah entered his room and changed into a loose pair of cotton shorts, just before landing in his bed and dozing off.

In the haze between early slumber and consciousness, he heard the door creak open and click closed, and Isaiah watched the vague, shadowed form of Nick quietly approach his bed.

"Can I lay down?" Nick whispered.

"Yeah."

The bed springs squeaked as Nick crawled over Isaiah and laid beside him. He rested his arm across Isaiah's stomach and held his hip, fingers teasing his waistband like he did in the orchard. But this time, there wasn't any fear of being caught. Isaiah's skin prickled with goosebumps as Nick leaned in and kissed him. His movements were slow and sensual, relaxing Isaiah's body and his mind with the comfort of his touch. He sighed against Nick's mouth, letting him slip his tongue inside and twirl with Isaiah's.

Nick's fingers slipped under Isaiah's waistband and continued downward. The waistband of Isaiah's shorts caught against his wrist and pulled down with it.

"'S this okay?" Nick murmured, placing a kiss to Isaiah's bottom lip.

Isaiah, rendered completely speechless as his gut twisted with a wave of immense desire, just nodded.

"You gotta tell me."

The soft drag of his fingertips downward sparked electricity, and heat blossomed just above the base of his cock. He was wide awake now.

"Fuck, Nick," he groaned. "Yes, it's fucking okay."

Nick chuckled, and, as slowly as he was touching him, wrapped his hand around the base of Isaiah's dick. Isaiah moaned as his body flooded with comfortable warmth and the achingly loud need for more.

“That’s good, huh?” Nick said against his lips.

Isaiah couldn’t respond as Nick started pumping his dry hand up and down, his thumb catching on Isaiah’s tip and dragging the leaking precome around his crown. Even the slightest pressure under his tip felt like a live firework, sparkling with an array of colours behind his fluttering eyelids.

Nick’s breath had quickened with Isaiah’s, and he felt the bare nudge of something hard against his hip. Isaiah glanced over and reached out, palming Nick’s erection through his boxers. He fought back his pleased smile at the cold touch of wet fabric as he swallowed Nick’s moan with a sloppy kiss. He slowly pushed Nick backwards onto the bed with his other hand. Isaiah adjusted his shorts to sit under his dick as Nick’s hand pulled away, and he straddled Nick’s lap.

Cold flames licked at his skin where Nick dragged his palms up Isaiah’s thighs. He shivered at the sensation before bending down and licking into Nick’s mouth.

“Touch yourself,” he said. Nick pulled back and eyed Isaiah, and, for a second, he thought he had fucked up, but that same expression Nick beared just before the fireworks had shot off flickered over his face again, and he nodded.

Isaiah leaned back on his heels and watched as Nick pushed his shirt up, and pulled the waistband of his boxers down, under his balls.

His mind twitched at the sight, gripping him and dragging him back to the hazy memory beside the river. He was only there because Isaiah’s friends had invited him to go and get food, and he wanted Nick to come, but seeing Nick laid there under the beaming sun with his hand on his dick, muscles twisting and tightening with each movement, had paralyzed Isaiah. He didn’t know how long he’d stood there just watching Nick get off — maybe that was completely fucking creepy in retrospect — but it had cemented his feelings for Nick in some weird, twisted way, because Nick looked so peaceful; his jaw wasn’t clenched with irritation, and his eyes were just closed, not screwed shut. He looked beautiful under the spotty rays of sun, like the tendrils of light were caressing his face with an immortal beauty.

“Jsi tak krásný,” Isaiah muttered under his breath as Nick wrapped a hand around his own cock. In the moonlight beaming through the window, he could trace a trickle of precome dribbling from Nick’s tip. Isaiah’s dick twitched.

Nick whimpered behind his closed lips, and started to stroke himself in time with Isaiah's quickening breath.

"Say it again," Nick said against a moan. "Fuck, Isaiah— say it again."

Isaiah bent down to kiss a line from Nick's jaw to the underside of his ear, where he whispered, "Jsi tak krásný."

"Shit," Nick sighed as he screwed his eyes shut. "I'm so close—."

Isaiah captured his lips again in a quick kiss, before quickly pulling off Nick's shirt — with the help of Nick's free hand — and tracing his way down Nick's body. He pressed his mouth to his warm skin, flicking his tongue over Nick's perk nipple, kissing the silver stretch marks lining his soft belly. He crawled down and laid between Nick's legs, sighing as Nick dragged a hand through his curls and held him at the base of his neck — not pushing, just holding his palm to his nape, a gentle guidance.

"You don't have to," Nick said.

"I want to."

He *really* fucking wanted to. He wasn't experienced at all — the only thing he could go off of was the blowjobs he got from girls who hated being sloppy and were always too clean for his liking — but he wasn't dumb. He understood the general gist of sucking dick.

Nick's cock was erect in his hand, tall and thick; his tip was a pale pink, shining with wet. Isaiah bent down and mouthed his shaft where Nick's hand met the skin of his cock, nudging Nick away until he let go — Isaiah gripped him instead, keeping him steady as he licked a long stripe up to his tip. A deep groan dragged from the depths of Nick's throat.

"Holy shit," Nick mumbled, hand tightening against Isaiah's nape.

Isaiah flicked his tongue over Nick's tip, licking the slit and swallowing the dribble of his salty precome, before enveloping his head in his mouth. He sucked him down a couple inches — as far as he could go before he feared gagging — and tried so fucking hard not to hump the bed at the whine that keened from Nick.

"Isaiah," he breathed. "Fuck, I'm gonna—."

Isaiah reached for Nick's hand that was twisted in the bedsheets, and

sighed around the mouthful of his dick as their fingers intertwined. Nick's body shuddered, and he could feel him tense, his dick swelling and growing hotter on Isaiah's tongue as he lazily bobbed his head.

"Isaiah," he warned this time.

But he wasn't going to stop, not when he had Nick right in his palm — and mouth. That was what he wanted this entire time; to give Nick a spectrum of pleasure, from gentle hugs and quiet conversations, to the aching desire to touch each other and experience soul ripping orgasms they'd never had before. He wanted to hold Nick, hug him until he felt like jelly, and whisper sweet nothings to him. He wanted to fuck him hard into the bed as he cried and screamed Isaiah's name. He wanted to cook him a hot, home cooked dinner when winter was scratching at the windows, and take him to the beach when it was spring.

He wanted to live a life with Nick he knew he probably would never get to have.

Fuck, he was so gone on him.

Nick let out a final, broken moan, fingers tightening in Isaiah's hold, muscles trembling and back arching as the shockwave of his orgasm spread throughout his body. His release filled Isaiah's mouth, his come disgustingly salty on his tongue, and Isaiah tried not to gag as he swallowed around the hot weight of Nick's dick.

He sucked off of Nick, and rested his cheek on Nick's lap, panting for air. His lips were slick with spit and come, but he didn't bother wiping it away. It felt like a trophy. Nick's hand drew small, strange symbols in his hair, twirling his curls and scratching at his scalp.

An overwhelming sense of comfort washed over him, blanketing his body with an unusual familiarity. He kissed Nick's spent cock once more, a sweet goodbye, and crawled up the rest of his body before collapsing on top of his chest. His still hard dick slotted right into the dip of Nick's hip, and he desperately told himself not to thrust against Nick if he wanted to retain some semblance of sanity.

Nick looked dishevelled, hair wild and messy against the pillow, and his cheeks were flushed bright red. His eyes were sparkling though, and he looked as gorgeous as ever.

"Jsi tak krásný," Isaiah murmured, pressing his lips to Nick's cheek tiredly.

“That’s all you know, huh?”

“I know more,” Isaiah argued, but his voice had no fight in it.

“Yeah, like what?”

“Ja nevím.”

Nick laughed and said, “Můžu tě mít rád, i když ani neumíš česky?” His tone was lighthearted, sweet like peach tarts. But his voice was deep, and rough, scratching at Isaiah’s gut like the drag of fingernails on his cock.

Isaiah’s hips canted up as his dick twitched, throwing his prior promise to himself right out the window.

“You like when I speak Czech, huh?”

“You seemed to like it when I spoke it,” he said as he nibbled the side of Nick’s neck. He lazily thrusted against his hip, sighing as the hand in his hair travelled down his body and gripped the underside of his ass, guiding his movements.

A few more thrusts, and his body shuddered with release, spilling his come over his and Nick’s skin. He buried his face in Nick’s neck and breathed him in; a sweet waft of sweat, eucalyptus, and maple syrup enveloped him, and he struggled to stay awake as sleep tugged at him.

Nick slowly rolled Isaiah over, laying him on his back. He grabbed his shirt and started wiping the both of them down, then pulled their shorts back up. When he was done, he flung his shirt into the corner of the room and fell into Isaiah’s beckoning arms. Their legs tangled and their arms wrapped around each other. It was the closest Isaiah would’ve ever gotten to worship.

“Say something else to me,” Isaiah asked.

Nick was quiet for a moment, before speaking. “You give good blowjobs.”

“No, asshole. In Czech.”

Isaiah felt the rise and fall of Nick’s chest against his own as he listened to the loud whir of thoughts in Nick’s restless mind.

“Když mě líbáš, mám pocit, že mám smysl. A myslím, že se do tebe zamilovávám a nemůžu si pomoct.”

Isaiah pulled back ever so slightly to look at Nick's flushed face. He cocked an eyebrow at him, and Nick smiled in response.

"What does that mean?"

Nick leaned in to kiss Isaiah's cheek, before whispering into his skin, "You give good blowjobs."

"Fuck off," Isaiah said with a matching smile, hiding it as he pressed his forehead against Nick's collarbone.

For the first time in a very long time, Isaiah felt the world slow down around him. Not with anxiety, not with shock, but with the ease of the love he had for Nick. There was nothing difficult to understand about it, he didn't even need to put another thought into it. He just simply loved him. Each touch, each word, each gentle kiss felt like another addition to the pile of things that kept him going, kept him out of his nervous and overthinking head.

He hoped Nick felt like that too, like there were no other worries besides what kiss they'd share next.

The space beside him was empty, and Isaiah felt an ancestral chill settle deep in his bones. His hand grazed the sheets; as cold as his blood ran. He slumped back against the bed with a harsh exhale. Nick's shirt was still in the corner, crumpled and Isaiah thought he could see a stain he'd have to scrub in the shower. He peeled the thin sheet off his sweaty and tired body, and swung his legs over the side of the bed.

It must've been midday as he could see the sun light up the orchard in a pale gold. The harvested trees shivered in the gentle breeze, empty of their ripened offspring. Isaiah knew at least three boxes of peaches were being shipped down south towards Florida, and a few more west. Lily would've wanted to start canning the peaches and cooking jam that day.

He remembered the last summer he was there. The kitchen had smelled of the tanginess of peach nectar as the soaked linens, trays of baked tarts, infused buchta, and simmering peach jam decorated the messy counter tops. Isaiah could only imagine the smell and taste of the saccharine juice again — licked from a wooden spoon, bitten into the flesh of a peach slice, kissed from Nick's mouth as the sun beat down on the back of their necks.

He stood up, and stretched his arms above his head, releasing the tension building from the night before. Fuck, it was as magical as girls like to call it — halfway through he thought he was dreaming the sound of Nick's stifled whimpers and the feeling of their slick skin.

But it was all real. It was all so fucking real.

Isaiah changed out of his shorts, put a clean pair of boxers and jeans on, and strangled a shirt over his head. When he opened his door, he could hear quiet chatter and the clanging of pots. He thought Nick must've been helping Lily out in the kitchen, but when Isaiah made his way downstairs, he found only Alex with her.

As he entered the kitchen, the both of them looked over at him, faces splitting with faint nervousness.

"What's with the faces?" Isaiah frowned, glancing at the peach bread loaf. It looked fine, and so did all the other peaches. "Did a batch still have brown rot?"

He grabbed a slippery peach slice from a bowl and bit into it, eyeing Lily's deepening expression. She sighed and glanced at Alex, before stepping forward.

"Isaiah…" She started, her voice soft and comforting.

He swallowed the bit of peach, and shook his head. "What?"

She pressed her lips into a thin line, as Alex left the kitchen, and sat down at the dining room table with a huff.

"What? Where's Nick?"

"He left."

Suddenly, it felt like his whole world was collapsing in on itself, or his ears were ringing so loud his chest was concaving from the vibrations. Was it some kind of sick joke? He huffed a curt laugh and glanced at Alex, but his face shared Lily's defeated expression.

"He *left*," Isaiah echoed, his nervous smile dropping.

"He left for boot camp this morning," Alex interjected. Even though he looked calm, he sounded so tired. There was no fight in him.

"What? Like boy scouts?" But he already knew what it was. He wasn't fucking stupid. He noticed when Nick went missing those few days

without telling Isaiah where he was going. He noticed when Nick looked like a guilty puppy who got into the treats. He noticed when Nick was purposefully not telling him something, because he *knew* Nick.

And he knew Nick wouldn't have done some bullshit like this. Or maybe he didn't know Nick well enough to make that assumption.

"The Marines, honey," Lily said softly.

Isaiah turned to Alex. "You tried to stop him?"

"You have no idea." Alex rubbed his eye with the heel of his palm. "He's a stubborn little shit when he gets a terrible idea."

Lily's hand rested on Isaiah's shoulder, massaging his tense muscle, and she gazed upon him.

"Do you need to sit?"

"No, I— *fuck*." Isaiah broke; tears prickled at the corner of his eyes, and he inhaled sharply. He dragged a hand across his mouth as his breath quickened in his chest. "Just— I need..."

Space. He needed space.

He remembered Nick that night in the car, defeat and tiredness in his eyes as he looked at Isaiah fondly. Isaiah thought he saw the complete dismantlement of Nick's shield; everything holding him down crumbled beneath Isaiah's lips. It was the first time he truly thought he could see Nick — the true version of him. Not some shitty, loud mouth asshole with too much to say for how little brains he had, but the sweet, caring boy who was so intelligent he knew two languages, and so valiant he could touch Isaiah without fear.

And then he was just gone, swept away in a current neither of them didn't understand.

"Who drove him?" He asked quietly, looking towards Alex.

"McAffey's boy. I sure as hell wasn't going to," Alex grumbled, turning to Lily. "*Blbej kluk*. They're gonna rip him apart in there."

"Let's just wait until we get a phone call, okay? We can't assume the worst."

Isaiah exhaled, ran his hand over his head, and turned to leave. He

just needed to get out, get as far away as possible.

Lily called after him as he stomped through the hallway and into the foyer, but her words were intelligible under the screeching ring in his ears.

The warm, midday air hit him as he trudged out onto the porch, breathing in gulps of air as his chest constricted.

“Fuck,” he cried, placing his hands atop his head and squeezing his eyes against the torrent of tears that threatened to pour.

He opened his wet eyes, looking out to the blurry rows of peach trees before him. The leaves waved, ruffled by the wind and bare of ripe fruit. Grass grew greener where water had dripped from the leaves, tufts sprouting in the shaky soil despite its sterile ground.

Isaiah wondered if Nick saw what he saw; the aftermath of their hard work purified to vacant bushes. Fruit taken from their mothers and shipped halfway across the country, stocked in the dark pantry of the Slovaceks’s kitchen, and baked into loaves they were meant to share.

Isaiah wondered if Nick thought more of them. Was he just a summer fling to Nick, but, ultimately, it was Isaiah’s mistake he was born male? He thought Nick was a womanizer — he probably still was — but he had constantly seemed to show otherwise. Every one of Nick’s looks, words, touches were Isaiah’s. It wasn’t the girl at church, it wasn’t Gosia at Santos’s house. It was *Isaiah*. Nick was putting his worth into Isaiah.

You’re something worth talking about.

And yet he wasn’t something worth staying for?

Isaiah spent the rest of the day in a lull, his movements hazy and memory foggy. He stayed with Lily most of the time, helping her with the jam. His movements felt mechanical: his knuckles ticking with each flex and movement of his fingers; each of his steps were as sluggish as the last, like he was stuck in a mud that wouldn’t let him go.

Lily kept pouting at him and giving him looks she thought he couldn’t see — it was starting to drive him stir crazy. And Alex kept coming into the kitchen when there was no reason for him to be there.

There was a thin line that they kept tugging, and it was close to snapping. After a while, he thought he understood what Nick felt like when he first came to their place. He thought he understood why Nick would lock himself up in his room for hours on end, only to come out for food or when asked to.

Because Lily and Alex were quiet and careful about their care, sure, but their shared looks were as loud as a gunshot in a silent field. The air around them felt constantly tense, weighing down on Isaiah's shoulder as if it was his fault they were concerned about him. At one point, he had sighed, and Lily's head snapped to look at him — he was almost terrified she pulled something in her neck or gave herself whiplash.

Sure, they cared, but it was so overbearing and uncomfortable he *wanted* to remove himself from them.

After dinner — which was so silent, a pin could've dropped five miles away and he still would've heard it — Alex went to his study to do who knew what, and Lily started the colossal task of cleaning the kitchen up. When Isaiah tried to help, she waved him away.

"Go sit in the living room, honey. If the phone calls, answer," she said.

Isaiah just nodded and sat down on the couch, hands gripping his knees tight as he glared at the opposing wall. His mind raced with possibilities; if Isaiah never told Nick about the Marines, would he still have gone? Was that always something he wanted to do? And at what point did he feel like he needed to go?

Isaiah didn't know how long he sat there, sorting through his mind for any clue that might've peeked through Nick's shuttered feelings, but around ten, the phone rang.

He stepped into the foyer, hand shaking as he reached out for the phone. He picked the handset up and hesitantly held it to his ear. A loud cacophony of yells blared through the speaker, and Isaiah could barely hear Nick's over the shouting.

"This is Recruit Slovacek," Nick said, his voice unshakable and harsh. It wasn't the voice Isaiah knew; it wasn't the voice that whispered flowery Czech against his skin, nor the voice that made Isaiah's insides turn to liquid. "I've arrived at Parris Island."

Isaiah's words caught in his throat.

“Do not send any food or bulky items to me in the mail. Send tobacco and rolling papers, or I’m gonna fucking kill someone.”

It wasn’t the voice that tried to teach him how to speak a language whose words meant more than English could ever convey. It wasn’t the voice that moaned his name lovingly into the dark night.

Instead, it was chilling, overconfident. A mask. Isaiah couldn’t hear Nick; he heard a Jersey City asshole who couldn’t tell right from down. He heard Slovacek.

“You fucking coward,” Isaiah muttered, choking on his own words.

Nick went silent for a few moments.

“I’ll contact you in seven to ten days by postcard with my new mailing address,” Nick continued, quieter and softer. He cleared his throat. “Thank you for your support.”

Isaiah itched to slam the handset back down, to not give Nick the time of day. That was what he deserved, right?.

“Miluji tě navždy,” Nick whispered, his voice breaking on the last word as if it was painful to say.

The phone clicked as Nick hung up, and Isaiah’s ears rang with the absence of sound. He pressed the handset into his temple and jaw, screwing his eyes shut as unmistakable tears dripped down his face.

“Miluji tě navždy,” he muttered, over and over again like the universe would give him the power to understand Nick if he kept saying it.

Days dragged on, kicking rocks as they went. Isaiah had never felt so fucking exhausted, and he didn’t even know why Nick leaving affected him so much. Sure, they were together in some kind of unspecified way, but was it ever that serious?

Every time he thought back on the fleeting moments he shared with Nick, his chest ached with a burning loss. Something was carved out of him, and it felt like there was a gaping hole that wouldn’t ever be filled.

Lily kept acting like Isaiah was fragile china; stepping around her words like they were landmines, looking at him with a glassy gaze, smiling when he entered a room. Isaiah just wanted to rip his hair out

and yell that he wasn't another Nick. He wasn't a child, he wasn't fucking broken, and he wasn't something that could be fixed otherwise.

He missed his mom worst of all. He'd forgotten how long he was there before Nick left because time just slipped by him, but now that nothing was tying him down to the Slovaceks's place, besides a punishment that was practically obsolete, it felt like the days were longer and increasingly difficult to get through. He hadn't talked to his mom in a while either — he missed her voice, the smell of her rose perfume, and her embrace.

A few days after Nick left, Isaiah snapped at Alex. It was something so trivial he'd forgotten what it was about — the truck, or the trees, or some bullshit he really didn't care about — but he felt so on edge from both Lily and Alex's unnecessary caution that he couldn't control his own emotions. He didn't even remember what he said, he just knew that Alex and Lily talked about it because he could hear their conversation from where he sat on the top of the staircase.

Later that evening, Lily knocked on his door. She smiled that soft smile that made him want to throw something against the wall, and said, "You don't have to stay here if you don't want to be here."

Her words punched him in the stomach. It wasn't that she was telling him to leave, but more so offering a way out. She could see the pain he was feeling so clearly it scared him. Isaiah didn't know what to say, so he just nodded.

"I'll call your mom," she said.

Isaiah felt a faint kind of gratefulness, something warm pulsating in his chest. He pushed himself to start packing his things, rifling through his wardrobe and stuffing clothes back in his duffel bag. There was one shirt that caught his eye; a pale yellow shirt, ironed crisp on the hanger. He ran his hand over the fabric, and tugged at the bottom button.

Nick had told him he hadn't fucked that girl, but Isaiah wasn't entirely sure he was telling the truth — not after he up and left without comment. He took Nick's word at the time. What kind of idiot was he to believe him?

His hand fell away from the shirt, and he closed the wardrobe door over. He probably wouldn't have seen Nick ever again. What use was there in keeping ghosts in his closet at home? He stepped away, and

glared down at his duffel bag, then at the bookshelf. He started pulling his textbooks and novels out, chucking them into the bag carelessly.

There was another knock at his door, and he turned to see Alex leaning against the doorway.

“How are you?” He asked.

Isaiah shrugged, and continued pulling out his books.

“I know this has been difficult for you.”

Isaiah stifled his exasperated sigh. “It’s not like he died.”

“But he left. I’d say that’s far worse.” Alex frowned, then said, “In this case.”

He couldn’t stop his smile.

“Look, Isaiah, he…” Alex pressed his lips into a line and furrowed his brows. “He didn’t leave because of you.”

“He told you that?”

Alex nodded, but it felt like there was more to it than just that.

“Don’t blame yourself,” Alex said. “That’s all I ask of you. And if you ever want to come back, our door is always open.”

“Thanks,” Isaiah muttered as his heart skipped a painful beat.

“Gotcha’.”

His mom came the next day. Isaiah was crumpled over, sitting on the porch steps, and holding his head in his hands as he desperately tried not to cry with the memories surrounding him like an uncomfortably thick blanket on a hot summer’s night; the conversation that somehow turned into an argument, and that afternoon after church where Isaiah thought Nick would brush him off, but, instead, sat and talked with him like they were friends.

When he heard his mom’s car pull up, he burst into tears — dripping hot down his flushed cheeks. She climbed out of the car, and sat beside him, slinging an arm around his shoulders and cradling him to her chest. Her other hand scratched at his curls, twirling them around

her fingers. He felt like a young boy again, terrified of the dark shadows in the corner of his bedroom.

“What’s wrong, baby?”

He cried into her shirt, sniffling his leaky nose. “I just missed you,” he muttered.

“Oh, honey,” she sighed, rocking him back and forth.

On the drive home, she turned the music up — a jazzy tune he used to hear her hum as she studied big law textbooks for her job — and sang along, running a hand through his hair. She smiled at him, and he smiled something unsteady back.

“What would you like for dinner, huh?”

“Whatever you’re making.”

“Alright. I’ll warn you though, it’s gonna be good.”

Isaiah chuckled, and looked out the window. Pennsylvania passed by like a hazy memory, distant and far in his mind, but so close it still hurt to think about. It was terrifying how quickly everything imploded; how quickly Nick and Isaiah’s relationship developed, and then how quickly it blew up. There was something so fickle about them, he wasn’t sure if it was one sided or they were both liable.

He frowned, and turned back to his mom.

“Do you know how to make kolache?” He asked.

“Those Texas roll things?”

Isaiah shook his head, and slumped in his seat. “Nevermind. Don’t worry about it.”

It seemed that Nick would become just an afterthought to him now, as Isaiah was to him. Maybe it was easier that way — maybe it was easier to pretend nothing happened, and that what did, didn’t change him at all.

Chapter End Notes

> as promised, translations. my translations may be wildly off, but i am going based off internet sources. tell me if any of these are wrong, or can be translated better!

Upřímnou soustrast — roughly, “My condolences.”
Neboj, ty si ju nestrelil — “Don’t worry, you didn’t shoot her.”
Me da igual — “Doesn’t matter to me.”
Coño — “Damn.”
Claro — “Sure.”
Zatím čau — “Bye for now.”
Do zobaczenia — “See you later.”
Nie rób niczego, czego ja bym nie zrobiła — “Don’t do anything I wouldn’t do.”
Já fakt nechápu, proč tě tak strašně chci. Prostě nevím — “I really don’t understand why I want you so badly. I just don’t know.”
Pojď sem hned — “Come here now.”
Musím brzy jít — “I have to go soon.”
Bylo to jen lékařské vyšetření — “It was just a medical examination.”
Neměl jsi tam jít — “You shouldn’t have gone there.”
Můžu tě mít rád, i když ani neumíš česky? — “Can I like you even if you don’t speak Czech?”
Když mě líbáš, mám pocit, že mám smysl. A myslím, že se do tebe zamilovávám a nemůžu si pomoct — “When you kiss me, I feel like I have a purpose. And I think I'm falling in love with you, and I can't help myself.”
Blbej kluk — “Stupid boy.”
Miluji tě navždy — “I love you forever.”
the book nick is reading is the unbearable lightness of being by milan kundera. it truly was originally written in czech but was banned in czechoslovakia until 1989 due to critical representation of the prague spring and soviet rule. it’s a very interesting book i hope to one day fully read. the quote translates to: “He suddenly recalled the famous myth from Plato's Symposium: People were hermaphrodites until God split them in two, and now all the halves wander the world over seeking one another. Love is the longing for the half of ourselves we have lost.”

thank you for reading, i’ve met so many wonderful people writing this story who’ve helped me push over roadblocks and continue writing despite the challenges. this story has held my heart for the past two months, and i truly do believe it’s changed me as a person.

this is definitely not the end of peach kolache because i cannot let these boys go without a happy ending. the sequel is currently being written, the first chapter should be posted soon, but no promises on time.

again, thank you for reading, i appreciate every single person who reads, gives kudos, and comments. i read every single comment because im so thankful for all of your words.

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